

SPECIAL DOUBLE ISSUE

# NFL PREVIEW

# Sporting News

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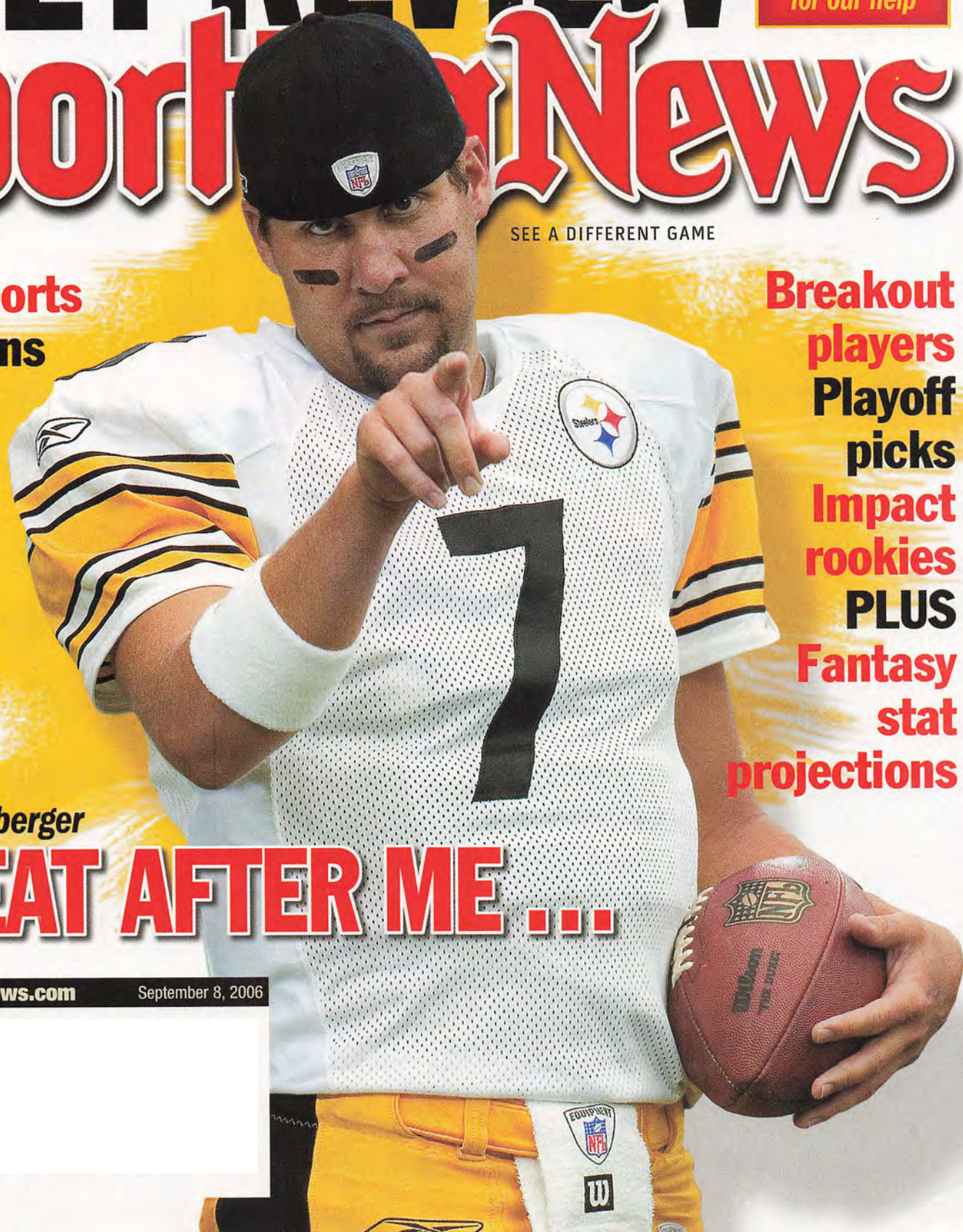
**Breakout**  
**players**  
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**picks**  
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**projections**

**Steelers QB**  
**Ben Roethlisberger**

# REPEAT AFTER ME ...

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September 8, 2006





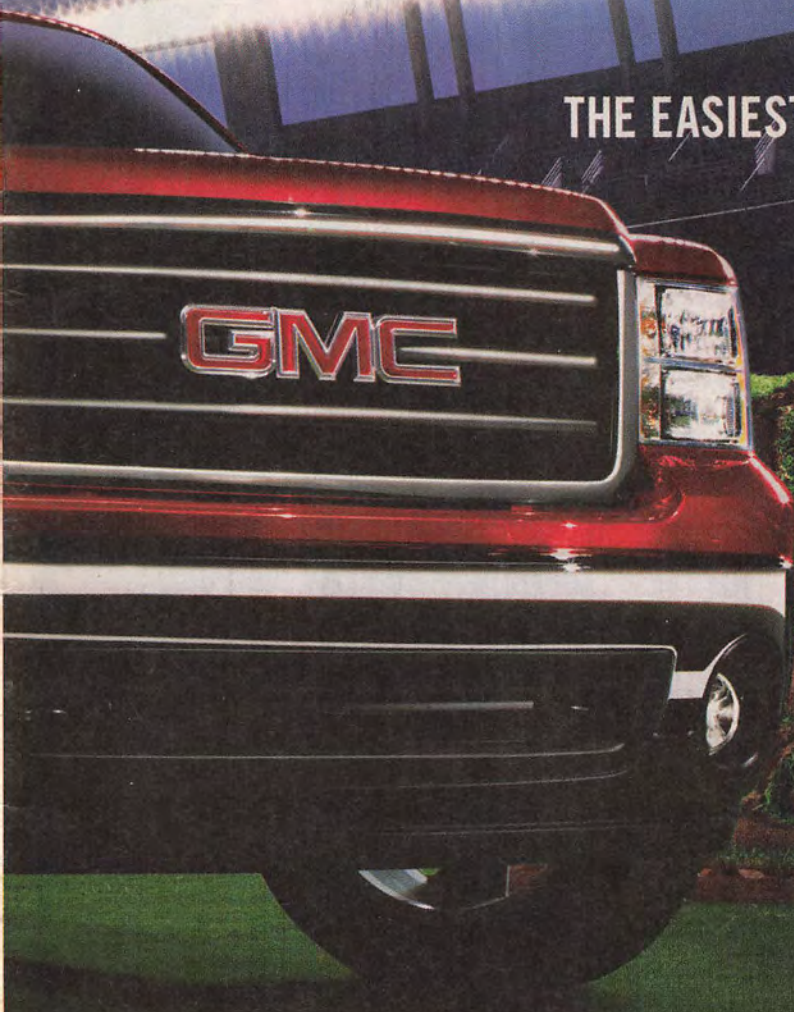
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# THIS WEEK

18

Edge isn't the only one ready to get down to business. Our NFL season preview will get you set, too.

> **NFL SEASON PREVIEW**

## 18 What warriors want

Players can go to Pro Bowls. Coaches can invent schemes. G.M.s can stockpile studs. But unless they're gripping that trophy at season's end, what's the point?

## 22 The NFC will rise again

The NFC has become the big brother who gets beaten up by his little brother. But big bro has been spending a lot of time in the weight room. *By Dan Pompei*

## 28 Final fantasy

If you haven't had your draft yet—or if you have but need a few last-minute pointers before the season starts—SN's Fantasy Source is here to help.

## 30 Team previews

Peruse two dozen pages packed with predictions, scouts' views, snapshot interviews, lineups rating every starter and breakdowns of all 32 teams.

## KNOW IT ALL

- 8 **To Know List** Watch out; it's a trap!
- 12 **On Deck** College football is back. Plus, **Bob Hille's Starting 5**.
- 14 **My Turn** Tricia Garner has some advice for the ladies out there: Don't waste your time with quarterbacks.
- 16 **Your Turn** Apparently, our readers play more football than our staff. Oh, there's a surprise.

## INSIDER

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+

### 88 DAVE KINDRED

At one New Orleans high school, football has been put back in place.

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COVERS: ALEXANDER BY JAY DROWNS / SN  
AND ROETHLISBERGER BY MICHAEL McNAMARA / SN



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## 2006 SENIORS – MARLIN BRISCOE

TOP ROW: Coach Don Shula, Michael Stewart, Capt. Brian Urlacher, Fred Harrell,  
BOTTOM ROW: Capt. Ryon Williams, Oswaldo Ibarra,



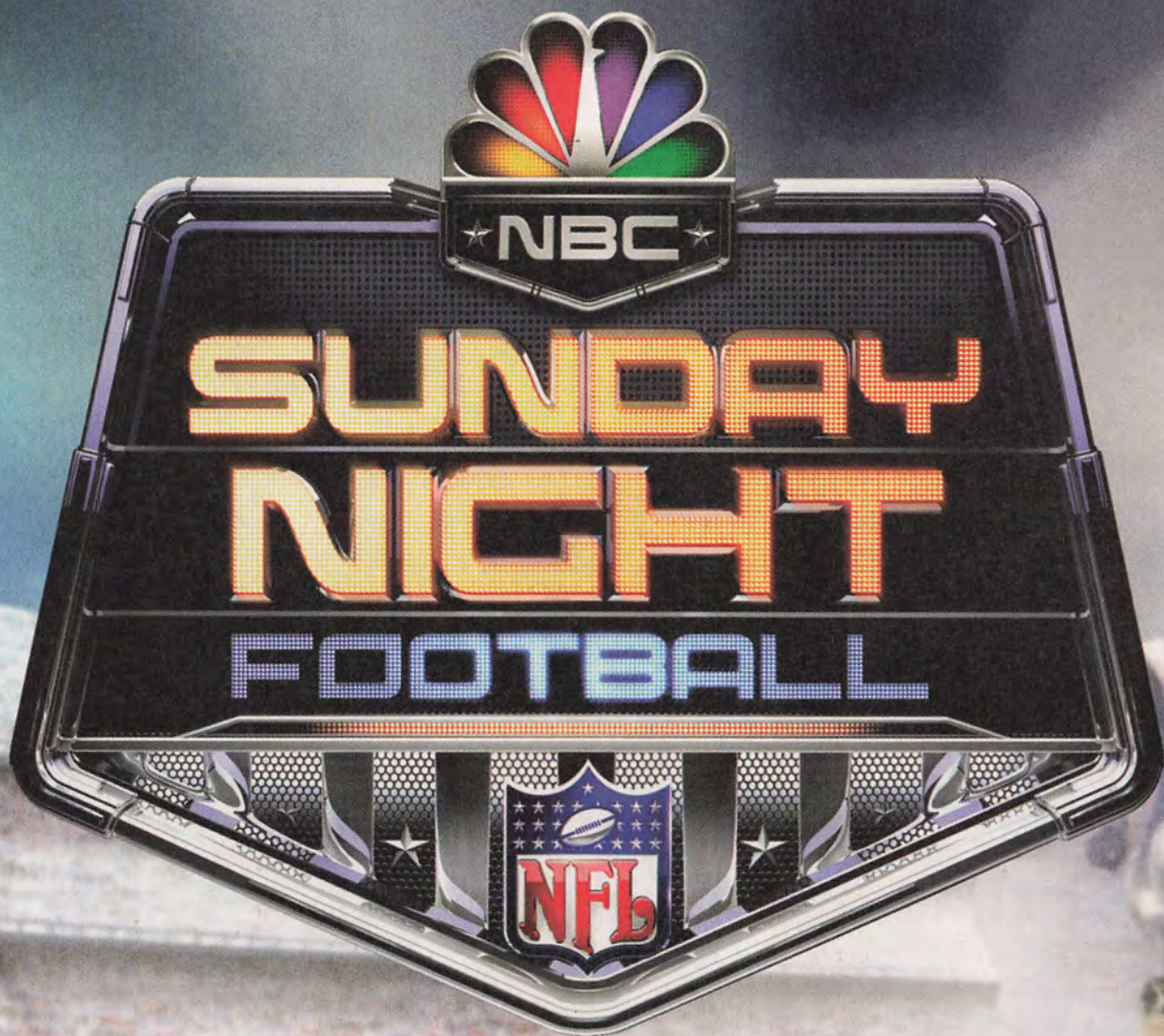
JUST DO IT.



# HAWKS VARSITY FOOTBALL

Albert Gomez, Capt. LaDainian Tomlinson, Michael Strong, Coach Urban Meyer  
Ikpemoghena Ikharo, Capt. Michael Vick, Andrew Childress





Go to **NBCSports.com** for updates all week long.

Thursday	9/7	NFL "Kick Off" Miami at Pittsburgh
Sunday	9/10	Indianapolis at New York Giants
Sunday	9/17	Washington at Dallas
Sunday	9/24	Denver at New England
Sunday	10/1	Seattle at Chicago
Sunday	10/8	Pittsburgh at San Diego
Sunday	10/15	Oakland at Denver
Sunday	10/29	Dallas at Carolina
Sunday	11/5	Indianapolis at New England
Sunday	11/12	Handpicked Game!
Sunday	11/19	Handpicked Game!
Sunday	11/26	Handpicked Game!
Sunday	12/3	Handpicked Game!
Sunday	12/10	Handpicked Game!
Sunday	12/17	Handpicked Game!
Monday	12/25	Philadelphia at Dallas
Sunday	12/31	Handpicked Game!



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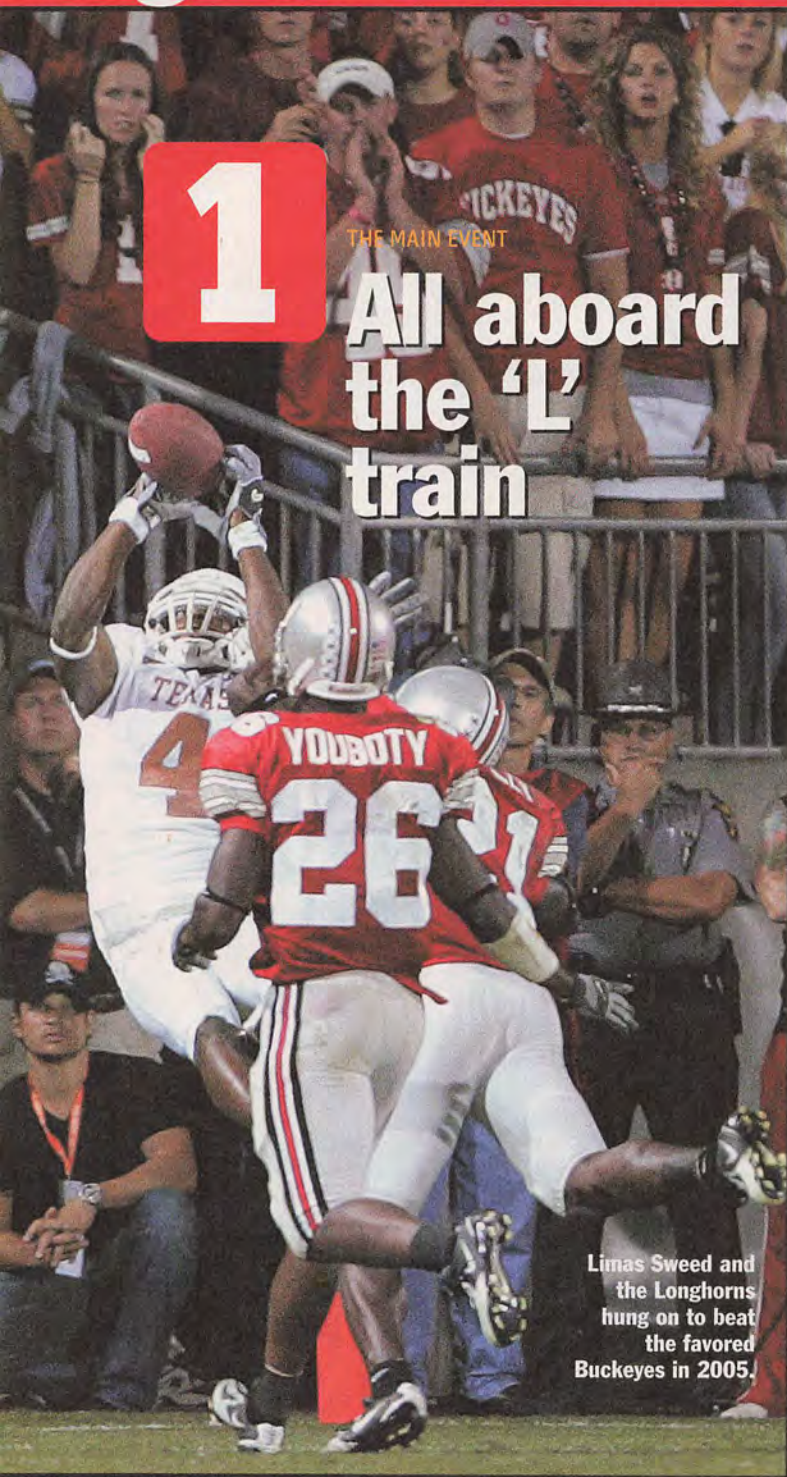


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# TO KNOW LIST

8 things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week



1

THE MAIN EVENT

## All aboard the 'L' train

Linas Sweed and the Longhorns hung on to beat the favored Buckeyes in 2005.

KUICHIRO SANO / AP

The Game of the—what's a bigger word than *millennium*?—is here. Actually, it's everywhere.

Make-or-break season starts this "weekend"—in college football, that's a very broad term—and, for all those national championship hopefuls out there, doesn't stop until their ashes have been left on some field in Phoenix, site of the BCS title game. (OK, fine, technically it's in suburban Glendale.) Lose once and that's all she wrote.

Oh, it isn't quite that cut-and-dried. But we try our best around here to help stoke the flames of drama. Is that so wrong? Looking very realistically at SPORTING NEWS preseason top 10, the first killer L's could come as soon as ... *gulp*:

**Right off the freaking bat.** No. 1 Notre Dame has Penn State, Michigan and Southern California on its schedule, but forget all that—the Irish are at Georgia Tech on Saturday (8 p.m. ET, ABC), and the Yellow Jackets, who beat Auburn and Miami last year, don't mess around against top competition. Speaking of Miami, No. 9 Florida State will be there on Monday to take on the Canes (8 p.m., ESPN2). Yeah, *that* should be easy.

**Way down the line ... in Week 2.** Not a bad little game in Austin on September 9, with No. 2 Ohio State taking on the defending champs. No Vince Young to save No. 7 Texas' bacon this time.

**Will September ever end?** It'll just be getting started. If Buckeyes-Longhorns is a potato, No. 4 LSU at No. 3 Auburn on September 16 is a po-TAH-to—just as good, only differ'nt. Also on the 16th, No. 6 USC welcomes recharged Nebraska, No. 8 Florida hits Tennessee and No. 10 Iowa gets its rivalry freak on with Iowa State, which beat the Hawkeyes' butts by 20 in 2005.

That leaves No. 5 West Virginia, whose schedule is softer than a baby's bottom. Relatively speaking. It's tough out there—every week. The Mountaineers may never know Phoenix from Glendale. —Steve Greenberg

2

MOVIES

## Three amigos, one bike

Entertainment magazines and gossip websites have been enthralled all summer with the unlikely BFF trio of Lance Armstrong, Jake Gyllenhaal and Matthew McConaughey. The Hollywood hotties have been joined at the hip, doing everything from working out together to hitting the clubs together. Now, word is out that there might be a *reason* for all the quality time. Armstrong reportedly has revealed that Gyllenhaal is set to play him in a Sony movie about his cancer battle and subsequent seven Tour de France titles. The pair has been training together in preparation for the role. Where does McConaughey come in? Apparently, he originally was considered to play Armstrong. And you thought it was just a big ol' man crush. —Tricia Garner



CHRIS CARLSON / AP



Maybe McConaughey is too big to play Lance. Gyllenhaal (left) is just right.

KEVORK DJANSEZIAN / AP

NEWS YOU CAN'T USE

Owens putting up 'Tour de France-type numbers' on exercise bike, agent says >> Parcels denies calling Blue Jays manager for advice on dealing with T.O.



3

TELEVISION

## The reality: It's good

The network that brought you seven strangers in a house and a look at the "real" O.C. now is bringing you a glimpse inside one of the nation's best high school football programs as it chases another state championship.

*Two-a-Days* (10:30 p.m. ET Wednesdays on MTV) follows several stars of Hoover (Ala.) High's 2005 squad through practices, games and off-field dalliances with cheerleaders. The clichés are there: the screaming coaches who like to use war analogies (*Saving Private Ryan*, apparently, is a favorite) and the dads trying to relive their glory days through their sons. But the pressure is palpable, too, from the player who is told he needs four doctors' notes to sit out one practice to the quarterback trying to fill the shoes of his older brother (who, by the way, is Alabama QB John Parker Wilson). There's no sugarcoating. Unlike those other MTV shows, *Two-a-Days* actually does come across as real. —T.G.



Get to know Alabama's finest on MTV.

4

## Watch it like a hawk

The days of John McEnroe screaming at officials are slipping into a bygone era.

The U.S. Open, which began Monday, has implemented instant replay technology by Hawk-Eye Innovations that uses eight video cameras to determine where a ball landed—to within 3 millimeters. Networks have been using the system on tennis telecasts for several years, but this is the first time it will be used as an on-court officiating tool at a Grand Slam event.

If this Hawk-Eye system works so well, other sports ought to be using it. No more debates about balls and strikes or close plays along the sideline. Seahawks fans might have liked a bit less margin of error on a certain Ben Roethlisberger run during the Super Bowl.

But instead of 21st Century accuracy, football still uses two guys with sticks and a chain to measure for first downs.

As Mac might say, "You can NOT be serious!" —Seth Elkin

5

GET IT BEFORE IT'S HOT

## Goo-goo! Ga-ga! Go team!

If you're a Longhorns fan who would consider disowning a child if he someday pledged allegiance to the Sooners, Team Baby Entertainment has the perfect preemptive tool for you. Its line of 30-minute DVDs (\$19.95 each) aims to turn your kid into a college football fan—for the appropriate team—right out of the gate. Choose from 20 school-themed discs, which feature visuals such as dancing mascots and slow-motion touchdown runs intercut with toddlers gleefully waving pompons and playing with squishy footballs. The Texas A&M video even teaches your child to spell "Gig 'em" with his blocks. They are brainwashing devices (to be fair, so are most children's videos), but parents who are avid college fans will get a kick out of them. Order online at [team-baby.com](http://team-baby.com). —T.G.



6

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: GOOD TEAMS GONE BAD?

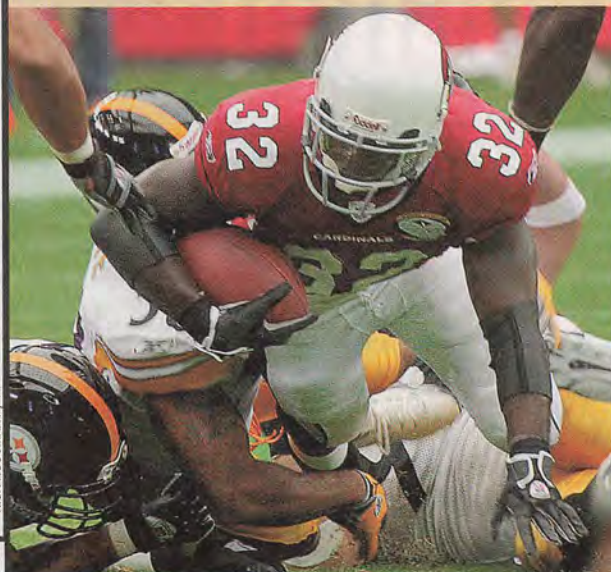
## Look out below

Hear those thuds? They're the sounds of fans doing Triple Lindys off NFL bandwagons. It seems a bit early to be bailing out—Brett Favre hasn't even thrown an interception that counts—but recent developments are tempering expectations about some teams.

**Redskins.** Cornerback Shawn Springs, the team's most versatile defensive back, had abdominal surgery and could miss the first three games. Running back Clinton Portis separated his shoulder, an injury that could hinder him all season. And run-stuffing defensive tackle Cornelius Griffin has a gimpy knee.

**Chiefs.** After Larry Johnson rushed for 1,351 yards and 16 TDs in nine starts last season, fans started calculating what he could do over 16 games. That was before left tackle Willie Roaf retired and was replaced by Kyle Turley, who has been out of football for two years. The Chiefs' other tackle is expected to be Kevin Sampson, who has started one NFL game. Those L.J. extrapolations might have to be revised.

**Cardinals.** Edgerrin James was supposed to resuscitate a run game that was last in the NFL a year ago. In his first three preseason games, he rushed for -2, 0, 2, 3, 0, -2 and 0 yards. That's seven carries for 1 yard. Is there some reason to think the line will be better in the regular season? —Dennis Dillon



RICK HOSKMAN / AP

7

YOU HEARD IT HERE

'We have a weakness that sometimes is our strength: We love to swing.'

—SN's Todd Jones on his loosey-goosey Tigers (page 67)

8

SPORTS BUSINESS

## An off-color offer

A lowbrow publicity stunt or a high-end business offer? You decide. Owners of the Pink Taco restaurant in Scottsdale, Ariz., reportedly offered the NFL Cardinals \$30 million over 10 years for the naming rights to the team's new stadium. The Cardinals say there is "zero chance" that name will appear on their stadium, according to *The Arizona Republic*. But the Pink Taco is an expanding business—locations are planned for several major cities including Los Angeles, Chicago and Dallas—owned by the Morton family of Morton's Steakhouse and Hard Rock Cafe fame. The Cardinals are saying no. Might some other major sports franchise say yes? —S.G.







# Sandwiched

between a cement mixer and a semi.

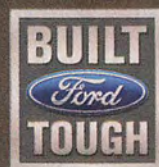
Never saw it coming.

47-car pileup in Nevada.

After they separated everything,

he drove himself home.





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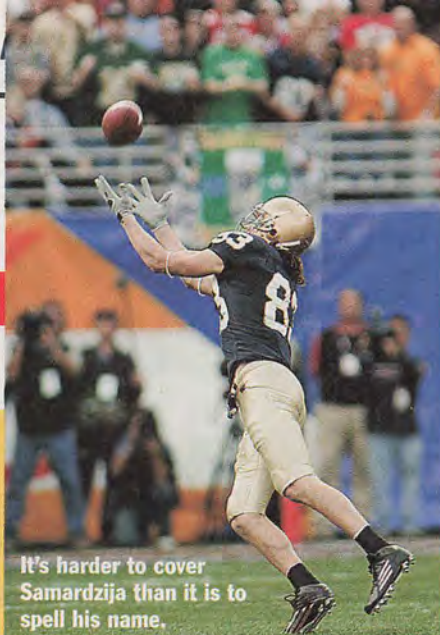
# ON DECK

The week ahead in sports

## THIS I GOTTA SEE All times Eastern

### SAT 2

No cupcakes allowed for college football's first pigfest. The rib-sticking fare includes a Pac-10-SEC sampler of **Cal at Tennessee** (5:30 p.m., ESPN) and **USC at Arkansas** (8:45 p.m., ESPN), plus a hearty helping of **Notre Dame at G-Tech** (8 p.m., ABC), which will feature the nation's most acrobatic wideouts, Jeff Samardzija and Cal Johnson.



It's harder to cover Samardzija than it is to spell his name.

MICHAEL MCNAMARA / SN

### SUN 3

Old-timers get nostalgic for the Southern 500 this time of year, but you've gotta admit it's a lotta fun watching the drivers navigate the first half of the **Sony HD 500 at California Speedway** (8 p.m., NBC) while blinded by the tricky transition from daylight to darkness.

### MON 4

**Florida State at Miami** (8 p.m., ESPN2). These NFL factories should feel comfortable keeping the Monday night football slot warm for a week. Let's just hope their pro-style offenses don't go all Pop Warner on us like they did last year.



HENRY RAY ABRAMS / AP

### WED 6

**Bob Costas** takes a break from his Sunday pregame duties and his *Inside*

the NFL prep work to kick off another season of **Costas Now** (10 p.m., HBO) with an episode that breaks down all things football. Wait, isn't Bob-O a baseball guy?

■ Speaking of our former pastime, it's a **Sox-Sox** series finale (8 p.m., ESPN) at Fenway, where the fans will feel a lot better about those October dreams only if Boston is going for a sweep.

### THU 7

BCS-buster alert! **Boise State welcomes Oregon State** (7:30 p.m., ESPN), and Dan Hawkins left a heck of a team behind, including senior QB Jared Zabransky. The Broncos win this one and they're thinking 12-0.



OSCAR HIDALGO / AP

**Has Williams tanked?**

isn't a fitting name this year because only two Americans are seeded. Got anything left, Serena? —Kyle Veltrop

### FRI 8

There will be only two women standing after the **semifinals of the U.S. Open** (11 a.m., CBS), which

## BOB HILLE'S STARTING

# 5

**1 Labor Day.** It's a time to celebrate union solidarity. My only advice: If you're going to the NFLPA picnic, expect long lines at "Pin the Tail on Bryant Gumbel."

**2 FIBA basketball.** I can't believe I read this: We're relieved we avoided Argentina 'til the final? Must be Coach K is leery of that three-gaucha offense.

**3 The stretch.** It's when teams regret the moves they *didn't* make. Like the Blue Jays ... They wish they'd signed that 6-8 Little Leaguer as, y'know, pitching-change muscle.

**4 College football.** It ought to be a wild season, but I've already pinpointed the first megaupset: On September 16, Lee Corso will say something that makes sense.

**5 Madden 07.** Big party last week. They celebrated the video game's launch, presumably by giving morbidly obese teens tips on how to avoid carpal tunnel syndrome.

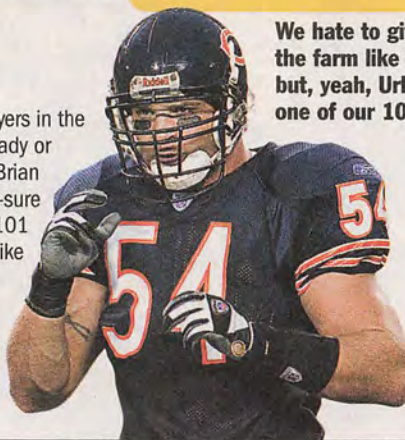
## COMING AT YOU

In the September 15 issue

**Pro Football 101.** Attention, class: Who are the best players in the NFL? And while we're at it, is Peyton Manning better than Tom Brady or vice versa? What about Larry Johnson or LaDainian Tomlinson? Brian Urlacher or Ray Lewis? You get the picture. Our annual rankings—sure to please and tick off every NFL fan—will cover the league's top 101 players and tell you who made the biggest jumps, who dropped like stones and what the list might look like a year from now.

■ So, what did we learn on opening weekend of the college football season?

■ The baseball players who will steer their big-dreamin' teams down the stretch.



We hate to give away the farm like this, but, yeah, Urlacher's one of our 101.

JAY DROWNS / SN

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# MY TURN

tgarner@sportingnews.com



**Tricia Garner**

Young and Restless

## Take a pass on that hotshot quarterback

Life's tough in the dating trenches—you'll be a lot better off with a lineman by your side

I'm a sophomore in high school. I'm constantly late to homeroom and I always forget to do my geometry homework, but there's one thing I never miss: my daily walk past hottie quarterback Joey Talmadge's locker. He always stops at his locker after fifth period, and my best friend and I have a ritual. On even days she gets to walk closest to the wall of lockers, on odd days it's my turn, and we see if we can accidentally-on-purpose graze Joey Talmadge's butt as we walk by.

I don't know this for sure, but I'm pretty positive no one was holding strategy sessions to determine the best way to touch Vinnie Spinella's butt. He was one of the offensive linemen. But we *should* have been. Tell your sister, your niece, your daughter—you do not need to date the coolest guy to be cool. Sometimes you're better off with the guy whose left arm makes it in the picture instead of the guy who is the picture.

Here's why you shouldn't be blinded by the flash of a QB's smile:

**The McDreamy/George paradigm.** You don't have to be an obsessive *Grey's Anatomy* fan (like—cough, cough—some people) to know exactly what I'm talking about. McDreamy is sexy, exciting and always a little out of your grasp. George is safe, comfortable and always there when you need him. George will bring you coffee.



**Girls like the idea of a pretty boy, but the reality? Totally different.**

McDreamy will make you feel lucky to bring him coffee. Which brings us to ...

**The God complex.** Every quarterback has one, which is what makes them so good. It's also what makes them so maddening. They expect people to fall down in worship at the altar of their protective cup. Yes, *I know everyone loves you and wants to be you, but HELLO! Make this zit on my chin disappear, Magic Man, and then we'll talk.* Linemen

have no illusions of omnipotence. They're just happy to get invited to the good parties.

**The high-maintenance factor.** Quarterbacks are, hands down, the prettiest boys on the team. Girls like the idea of a pretty boy, but the reality? Totally

different. A pretty boy gives you the you're-gonna-get-fat look when you're fending off the PMS monster with a pint of Ben & Jerry's and a tray of brownies. A

pretty boy steals your beauty products, forgets to compliment you because he's too busy complimenting himself and won't do anything fun if it has the remotest chance of making him look a little uncool. A

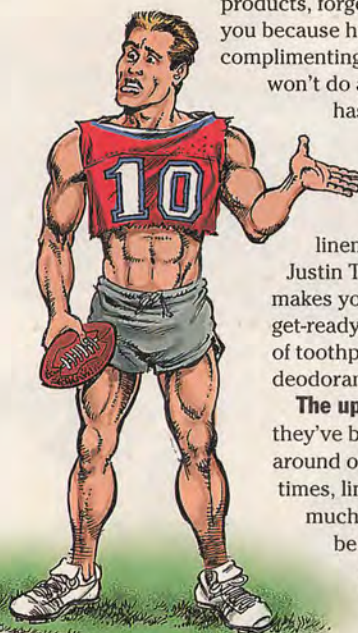
lineman will dance to Justin Timberlake if it makes you laugh, and his get-ready routine consists of toothpaste and deodorant. On a good day.

**The upside.** Unless they've been smacked around one too many times, linemen have a much better chance to be normal adults. On the other hand, once a hotshot quarterback, always a hotshot quarterback—at least in

his mind. You know him: the guy in his 40s still leering at 23-year-olds like he has a chance; the guy who expects the party to start the second he walks into a room.

**The groupies.** It's one thing for people to think your boyfriend's hot. I mean, they *should* think he's hot. But for every girl within a 10-mile radius to have a crush on him? No, thank you. Think of it this way: You can date the lead singer of the band or you can date the bass player. They're both *in* the band. You get all the cool points of dating the bass player without the insult of watching hoochie girls shake their thangs in his face (or walk past his locker trying to touch his butt).

Look, I get it—at the end of the day, the quarterback still is the quarterback. Go for it if you must ... but make sure you keep the lineman's number just in case.





(fold 1)

(fold 2)

(fold 3)

(fold 4)

(fold 5)

(fold 6)

(fold 7)

(fold 8)

(fold 9)

(fold 11)

(tear & tuck)

**ESPN**  
**MONDAY**  
**NIGHT**  
**FOOTBALL**

**IS IT MONDAY YET?**



# YOUR TURN

You rant, we listen. Send e-mails to [yourturn@sportingnews.com](mailto:yourturn@sportingnews.com).

I can't believe the Redskins got **T.J. Duckett**. They are now a serious threat in the NFC. They have more weapons than Maurice Clarett.

—whut via *SportingNews.com*

■ This is going to be a great college football season (SN, August 25). I'm praying for four or five 1-loss teams and the death of the BCS. I want a playoff! —agreig via *SportingNews.com*

■ Thank you, Dave Kindred, for a great article on an American hero, Romney Oaks (SN, August 25). Oaks displays the qualities our so-called role models need to have. —Matt Kelley, Jacksonville

■ I can't believe you gave Brent Musburger, Bob Davie and Kirk Herbstreit four TVs out of four in your announcer ratings (SN, August 25). Of the three, only Herbstreit is credible. Musburger roots for teams, and Davie shows on a regular basis why he lost his job at Notre Dame. He's terrible! —David Wilson, Findlay, Ohio

■ Paul Maguire was the main reason to watch *Sunday Night Football* on ESPN. His insights, accurate calls and pinpoint observations were terrific. I'm very

pleased he'll be back. —Camron Cooper via e-mail

■ Why wasn't Lance Berkman listed in your Fantasy Source "Keepers" rankings (SN, August 25)? He has been a superstar for several years. What gives? —Jimmie Jones, New Braunfels, Texas

■ The day will come when UCLA will be Pac-10 champ again and the Trojans will be the redheaded stepchild across town (SN, September 1). The evil Trojan Empire will be conquered, and the world will be right again. —ucla2k3 via *SportingNews.com*

■ Vince Carter is not the means to "a rebuilt

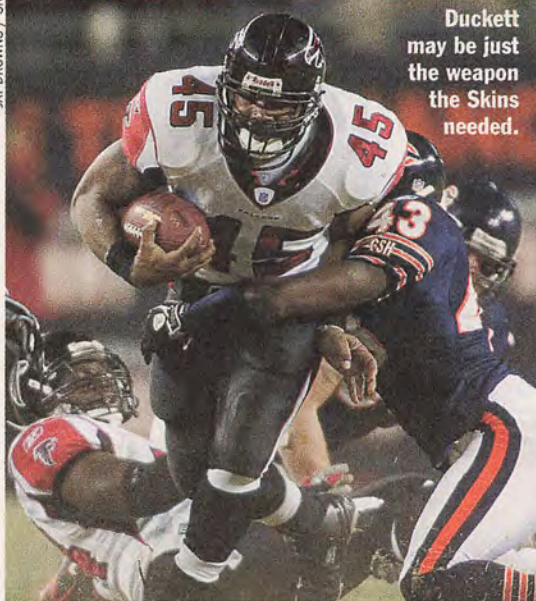
franchise in a hurry" (SN, September 1). Carter is soft and takes nights off. We will see a big drop-off in New Jersey this season as Vince's production goes down and his whining goes up. —griggman via *SportingNews.com*

## RADIO★STAR

Real talk from a fan on *Sporting News Radio*

**'The writing is already on the wall for T.O. Bill Parcells and Jerry Jones have egos the size of Texas if they thought they could bring this guy in and not have problems. I don't think T.O. could work on any team, but getting three egos together like this on one team can only end really bad.'**  
—Jim in Dallas on the Dave Stein Show

Duckett may be just the weapon the Skins needed.



JAY DROWNS / SN

## BLOG ON

From your blogs on [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com)

### RE: SPARRING PARTNER

Posted by *jetsmetsirish*

If we learned anything during this week in sports, it's that if you want to get into a fight, make sure Mark DeRosa is on your side and not Adam Kennedy.

### RE: DON'T THROW DIRT ON HIM YET!

Posted by *MANN*

Drew Bledsoe has the mobility of a statue, but he still has the arm to go deep. If he gets protection from the Cowboys' somewhat questionable offensive line, he can get the ball to Terrell Owens as well as Terry Glenn and Jason Witten. Drew Bledsoe is not done, folks. He can still be a good QB.

### RE: BRIGHTEST SUNS

Posted by *gamepass*

What was the best team the Suns put on the floor, and why? My personal favorite actually is not one of the teams that advanced to The Finals. It's the 1994-95 team. They were dismantling everyone when Danny Manning went down just before the All-Star break. They were so deep, they were bringing Manning and Dan Majerle off the bench.

### RE: HUNGRY GATORS

Posted by *guardian of the galaxy*

The defending NCAA champion Florida Gators (that may be the only time I ever write those words, but it sure felt good!) will play 16 games against teams that appeared in postseason tournaments last season. With six of those in nonconference play, we should have a pretty clear understanding of this team by the time it enters SEC play.

## POLLING PLACE

When was the last time you played in a 'real' game of tackle/touch/flag football?



NIRMALENDU MAJUMDAR / AP

Just this year, pal

It's been a couple years ... or maybe more like five

Hell if I remember

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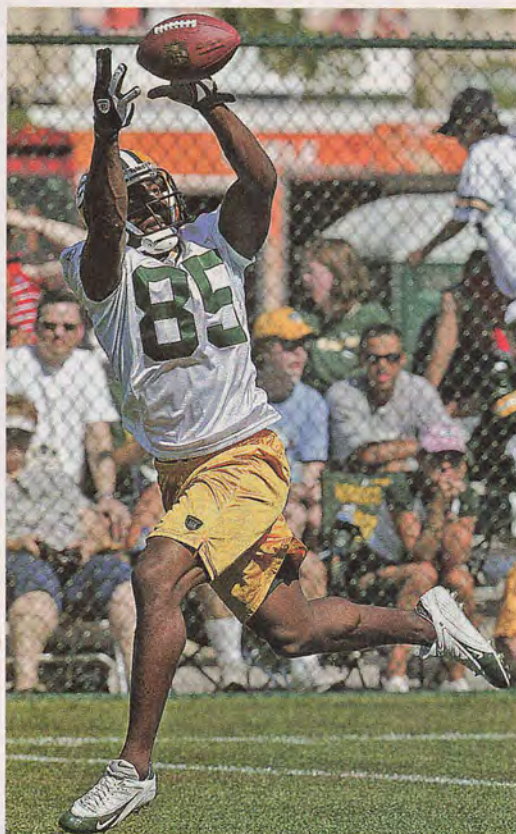
Photo by **JAY DROWNS / SN**



## Instantexpert

Your cheat sheet for the 2006 season

By Dan Pompei



MORRY GASH / AP

## Impact rookies

**Reggie Bush, RB, Saints.**

He'll make the Falcons look like Fresno State.

**A.J. Hawk, OLB, Packers.**

From the moment he steps on the field, the Packers will be tougher and better prepared.

**Tamba Hali, DE, Chiefs. >**

Instant pass rush.

**Michael Huff, SS, Raiders.**

He will give Oakland's defense the big-play element it has been missing.

**< Greg Jennings, WR, Packers.**

Brett Favre has to throw to somebody.

**Daniele Manning, FS, Bears.**

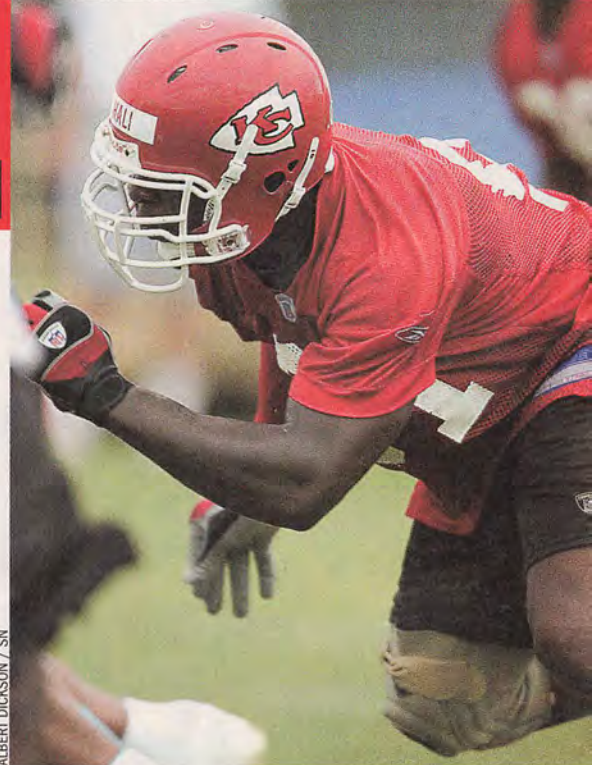
The kind of safety every team wants.

**Laurence Maroney, RB, Patriots. >**

Corey Dillon, take a seat.

**Tony Scheffler, TE, Broncos.**

Go ahead, try to cover him with a safety ... or a linebacker ... or a cornerback.



ALBERT DICKSON / SN



STEPHAN SAVIOIA / AP

## PREDICTIONS The "official" Sporting News picks, plus those of various Sporting News experts

	SN picks	Paul Attner Senior writer	Chris Bahr Associate editor	Brian Baldinger SN Radio, FOX Sports	Dennis Dillon Senior writer	Vinnie Iyer Projects editor	Carl Moritz Asst. managing editor	Dan Pompei Senior writer	Arnie Spanier SN Radio	War Room scouts
AFC East	Patriots	Dolphins	Dolphins	Patriots	Dolphins	Patriots	Patriots	Patriots	Dolphins	Dolphins
AFC North	Steelers	Bengals	Steelers	Bengals	Steelers	Steelers	Steelers	Steelers	Steelers	Bengals
AFC South	Colts	Colts	Colts	Colts	Colts	Colts	Colts	Colts	Colts	Colts
AFC West	Broncos	Broncos	Broncos	Chargers	Broncos	Chargers	Broncos	Chargers	Chargers	Broncos
Wild cards	Dolphins	Steelers	Patriots	Dolphins	Patriots	Dolphins	Dolphins	Ravens	Bengals	Ravens
	Chiefs	Jaguars	Chiefs	Broncos	Bengals	Broncos	Bengals	Broncos	Jaguars	Jaguars
AFC title	Steelers over Colts	Colts over Dolphins	Colts over Steelers	Chargers over Patriots	Colts over Broncos	Steelers over Colts	Patriots over Colts	Patriots over Colts	Dolphins over Colts	Broncos over Colts
NFC East	Cowboys	Cowboys	Cowboys	Giants	Giants	Cowboys	Cowboys	Redskins	Giants	Redskins
NFC North	Bears	Bears	Bears	Bears	Bears	Bears	Bears	Bears	Lions	Bears
NFC South	Panthers	Falcons	Panthers	Panthers	Panthers	Panthers	Panthers	Panthers	Panthers	Panthers
NFC West	Seahawks	Seahawks	Seahawks	Seahawks	Seahawks	Seahawks	Seahawks	Seahawks	Cardinals	Seahawks
Wild cards	Giants	Eagles	Giants	Redskins	Cowboys	Giants	Giants	Bucs	Cowboys	Cowboys
	Bucs	Panthers	Cardinals	Rams	Bucs	Bucs	Bucs	Falcons	Falcons	Cardinals
NFC title	Panthers over Cowboys	Cowboys over Bears	Panthers over Cowboys	Bears over Giants	Panthers over Bears	Panthers over Cowboys	Panthers over Seahawks	Seahawks over Bears	Panthers over Giants	Panthers over Seahawks
Super Bowl	Steelers over Panthers	Colts over Cowboys	Panthers over Colts	Chargers over Bears	Panthers over Colts	Steelers over Panthers	Panthers over Patriots	Patriots over Seahawks	Panthers over Dolphins	Panthers over Broncos



## Impact free agents

**Andre Carter, DE, Redskins.** Putting him in the hands of defensive mastermind Gregg Williams is like putting matches in the hands of an explosives specialist.

**Edgerrin James, RB, Cardinals.** He'll need some help, but he is a special, special player.

**Keyshawn Johnson, WR, Panthers.** > Meet Steve Smith's new best friend.

**Terrell Owens, WR, Cowboys.** He absolutely will destroy a number of teams—including, possibly, his own.

**Julian Peterson, OLB, Seahawks.** This is a dynamic playmaker on a defense that badly needed one.



BOB LEVERONE / SN

ALBERT DICKSON / SN

## Impact assistant coaching hires

**Mike Martz, Lions.** He might turn Jon Kitna into the next Kurt Warner.

**Al Saunders, Redskins.** He'll give Washington a cutting-edge offense for the first time since Joe Gibbs retired after the 1992 season.

**Chiefs' defensive staff.** Bringing in Tim Krumrie, Don Blackmon and David Gibbs to work under holdover coordinator Gunther Cunningham will toughen up a unit that has been soft.

**Bill Musgrave, Falcons.** Michael Vick is on the same page with his new quarterbacks coach.

< **Jim Haslett, Rams.** His intensity and strategy will be welcome additions in St. Louis.

## GOING DEEP

### Best AFC coach

Bill Belichick, Patriots

### Best NFC coach

John Fox, Panthers

### Best touch

Tom Brady, Patriots

### Most fearless quarterback

Brett Favre, Packers

### Quickest offensive lineman

Olin Kreutz, Bears

### Most powerful offensive lineman

Steve Hutchinson, Vikings

### Best receiving tight end

Antonio Gates, Chargers

### Best blocking tight end

Jason Dunn, Chiefs

### Shiftest running back

LaDainian Tomlinson, Chargers

### Best at getting yards after contact

Rudi Johnson, Bengals

### Best blocking receiver

Hines Ward, Steelers

### Surest hands

Larry Fitzgerald, Cardinals

### Best route runner

Marvin Harrison, Colts

### Best run support cornerback

Ronde Barber, Bucs

### Best cover safety

Eugene Wilson, Patriots

### Best blitzing linebacker

Shawne Merriman, Chargers

### Best cover linebacker

Pisa Tinoisamoa, Rams

### Quickest first step

Dwight Freeney, Colts

### Best end against the run

Richard Seymour, Patriots

### Best run-stuffing tackle

Marcus Stroud, Jaguars

### Best special teams kamikaze

Hanik Milligan, Chargers

## Five myths about the 2006 season



SCOTT AUDETTE / AP

That Culpepper-Dolphins handwagon is a bit crowded, no?

**1 The Eagles can't win without T.O.** They won the NFC East three times without him.

**2 Art Shell >** will bring discipline to the Raiders. If there is anything we've learned about the culture of the Raiders over the decades, it is this: No one

can bring discipline to this outfit.

**3 The Patriots can't survive without Adam Vinatieri.** Just like they couldn't survive without Lawyer Milloy, Ty Law, Damien Woody, Ted Washington or Charlie Weis.

**4 No team has more momentum than the Dolphins.** Sure, they won their final six games last season, but only one of those victories was against a contending team that had motivation to win. Oh, and Daunte Culpepper still looks a little gimp.

**5 The Chargers are sunk without Drew Brees.** This team isn't about the quarterback.



MARCIO JOSE SANCHEZ / AP

## Five players who could change the 2006 season

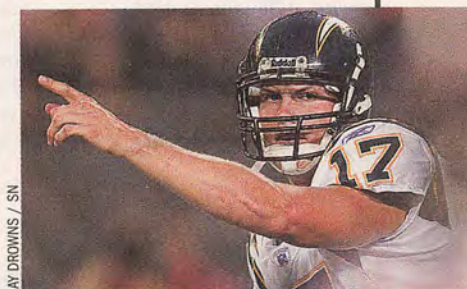
**Rex Grossman, QB, Bears.** Imagine the Bears with a passing game.

**Steve McNair, QB, Ravens.** Imagine the Ravens with a passing game.

**Steve Gostkowski, K, Patriots.** He will win some big games with clutch kicks—or be blamed for the fall of Western civilization.

**Philip Rivers, QB, Chargers.** > He is the team's only excuse.

**Kris Jenkins, DT, Panthers.** If this big fella returns to his pre-injury form, Carolina could have the NFL's best defense.



JAY DROWNS / SN





The NFC has become the big brother who gets beaten up by his little brother. But big bro has been spending a lot of time in the weight room.

## The NFC will rise again—maybe even this year

**T**here have been seven AFC Super Bowl victories in the past nine years. And the dominance runs deeper. The AFC has been the conference with the most regular-season wins, the best quarterback play and even the best strategizing. You could even say AFC teams have sexier cheerleaders and their stadiums serve colder beer.

The AFC has been the NFL's dominant conference the way Tiger Woods has been the PGA's dominant golfer.

The NFC may or may not reverse the Super Bowl flow this season, but throughout the year the senior conference likely will provide the stiffest competition the AFC has seen in a long time.

In fact, the 2006 season could be remembered for the rise of the NFC. "Some of the teams in the AFC have taken a step back, but I see a lot of NFC teams getting better consistently," says former Bears defensive lineman Tim Ryan, a commentator for FOX and Sirius radio.

A look at interconference

### Award predictions

#### Offensive player of the year

Cadillac Williams, RB, Bucs

#### Defensive player of the year

Shawne Merriman, OLB, Chargers

#### Offensive rookie of the year

Reggie Bush, RB, Saints

#### Defensive rookie of the year

A.J. Hawk, OLB, Packers

#### Comeback player of the year

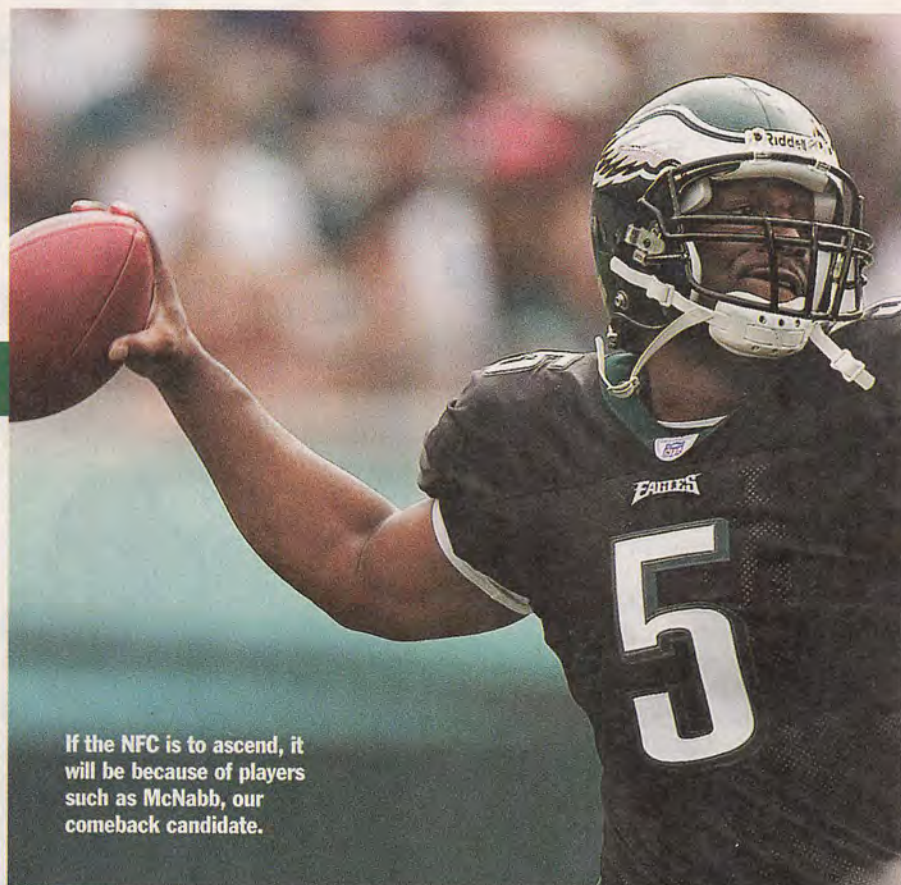
Donovan McNabb, QB, Eagles

#### Coach of the year

Bill Belichick, Patriots

games shows the NFC is gaining on the AFC. In 2004, the AFC won 44 of the 64 games between the teams. But last year, only two games separated the conferences, as the AFC had a 34-30 edge. This season, the NFC could win more games than the AFC for the first time since 1995.

NFC teams actually won 20 of the first 38 interconference games last season. In the final two months, some NFC teams began to wear down, in part because they were hit harder by injuries. Among the key NFC players who missed significant chunks of the season were Donovan McNabb, Terrell Owens and Brian Westbrook of the Eagles; Javon



If the NFC is to ascend, it will be because of players such as McNabb, our comeback candidate.

### speedreads

I just got a load of the Vikings' new uniforms. Excuse me while I barf. Now why would you take a well-received uniform that has stood the test of time and screw it up like that?

The new taunting rule is good for the game and good for sportsmanship at all levels of competition. In fact, it's long overdue. There is absolutely no place in sports for an athlete to flaunt his success in the face of another athlete.

Titans cornerback **Pacman Jones**, who was arrested and charged with disorderly conduct last week, doesn't get it.

T.J. Duckett may give the Redskins the depth they needed at running back, but I would have been uncomfortable giving up draft picks for a middle-of-the-road player expected to be a backup—and whose contract is up after the season.

ALBERT DICKSON / SN



### BLOG ALERT

It is possible, likely even, that Reggie Bush *isn't* rookie of the year.

Vinnie Iyer obviously doesn't think he will be, and the Texans may hope he won't be, but it's your opinion that counts—even if it's wrong—at [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com).



# Ranking the divisions

**1 NFC East.** This is the only division in which every team looks like a contender. The four already strong teams got stronger with the additions of A-list players (Terrell Owens to the Cowboys, LaVar Arrington to the Giants, Andre Carter and Antwaan Randle El to the Redskins and Darren Howard to the Eagles).

**2 NFC South.** The top three teams could be Super Bowl-worthy, and the fourth, New Orleans, added quarterback Drew Brees and running back Reggie Bush. The only problem for the Panthers, Bucs and Falcons is they're going to beat up one another.

**3 AFC North.** This is another division with three powerhouses, assuming Steve McNair gives the Ravens the lift they need on offense and the Bengals' defense doesn't make Carson Palmer's job impossible. The Super Bowl champion Steelers could be better than they were a year ago.

**4 AFC West.** There are three potential contenders: the Broncos, Chargers and Chiefs. There is some uncertainty here because the Chargers, Chiefs and Raiders are making transitions. San Diego has a new starting quarterback, the Chiefs have a new coach, and the Raiders have both.

**5 AFC South.** The Colts are the rock of this division, and it's easy to forget the Jaguars won 12 games a year ago. But it's possible this division will be defined by the players it lost, including McNair, Edgerrin James and Jimmy Smith.

**6 AFC East.** There is some serious rebuilding going on with the Jets and Bills, so the Patriots and Dolphins likely will have their run of the division. The drama will be in seeing whether Miami has closed the gap on New England.

**7 NFC West.** If any team other than the Seahawks contends, it will be a surprise. Piling up wins in this division helped Seattle become the king of the NFC last season.

**8 NFC North.** Only the Bears look like a sure thing. New coaches in Green Bay, Detroit and Minnesota make this the most unpredictable division.

Bulger of the Rams.

Why is the gap between the conferences closing? There are a number of reasons, but the most important is—surprise, surprise—defense. Last season, seven of the NFL's top 10 defenses—including the top three—came from the NFC.

It figures, given many of the game's young, emerging defensive stars play for NFC teams. Among them are linemen Osi Umenyiora (Giants), Will Smith (Saints), Tommie Harris (Bears) and Kevin

Williams (Vikings); linebacker Lofa Tatupu (Seahawks); and defensive backs Roy Williams (Cowboys), Sean Taylor (Redskins), Nick Collins (Packers), DeAngelo Hall (Falcons) and Nathan Vasher (Bears).

A number of players who have played in the Pro Bowl for the AFC crossed over to the NFC in the offseason, which is likely to strengthen the NFC and weaken the AFC. They include Arizona's Edgerrin James, New Orleans'

Drew Brees, Atlanta's John Abraham, Green Bay's Charles Woodson, New York's Sam Madison, Minnesota's Tony Richardson and Dallas' Mike Vanderjagt.

The Cardinals traditionally have been one of the league's most incompetent franchises, but James gives them hope. A new stadium also gives the Cardinals a jolt from improved revenue streams. If they are contenders—even a middle-of-the-pack team—the NFC will have one fewer hole.

For the NFC to take the next step, however, some of its young quarterbacks will have to step up. And there is evidence that could happen. Chris Simms of the Bucs has the pedigree, the receivers and the coaching to become a star this season. Two former No. 1 overall picks in the draft, the Giants' Eli Manning and the 49ers' Alex Smith, could be ready to break out. And it finally could be the year Grossman realizes his potential.

The two strongest divisions are in the NFC. "The NFC East and the NFC South are the best in football top to bottom," Ryan says. "You can take the two best divisions from the AFC and put them against the two best in the NFC, and I'll put my money on the NFC."

The beauty of putting your money on the NFC is you even would get points.

SN



BOB LEVERONE / SN

Walker, Robert Ferguson and Ahman Green of the Packers; Daunte Culpepper of the Vikings; Rex Grossman of the Bears; Kris Jenkins of the Panthers; Deuce McAllister of the Saints; Brian Griese of the Bucs; and Marc



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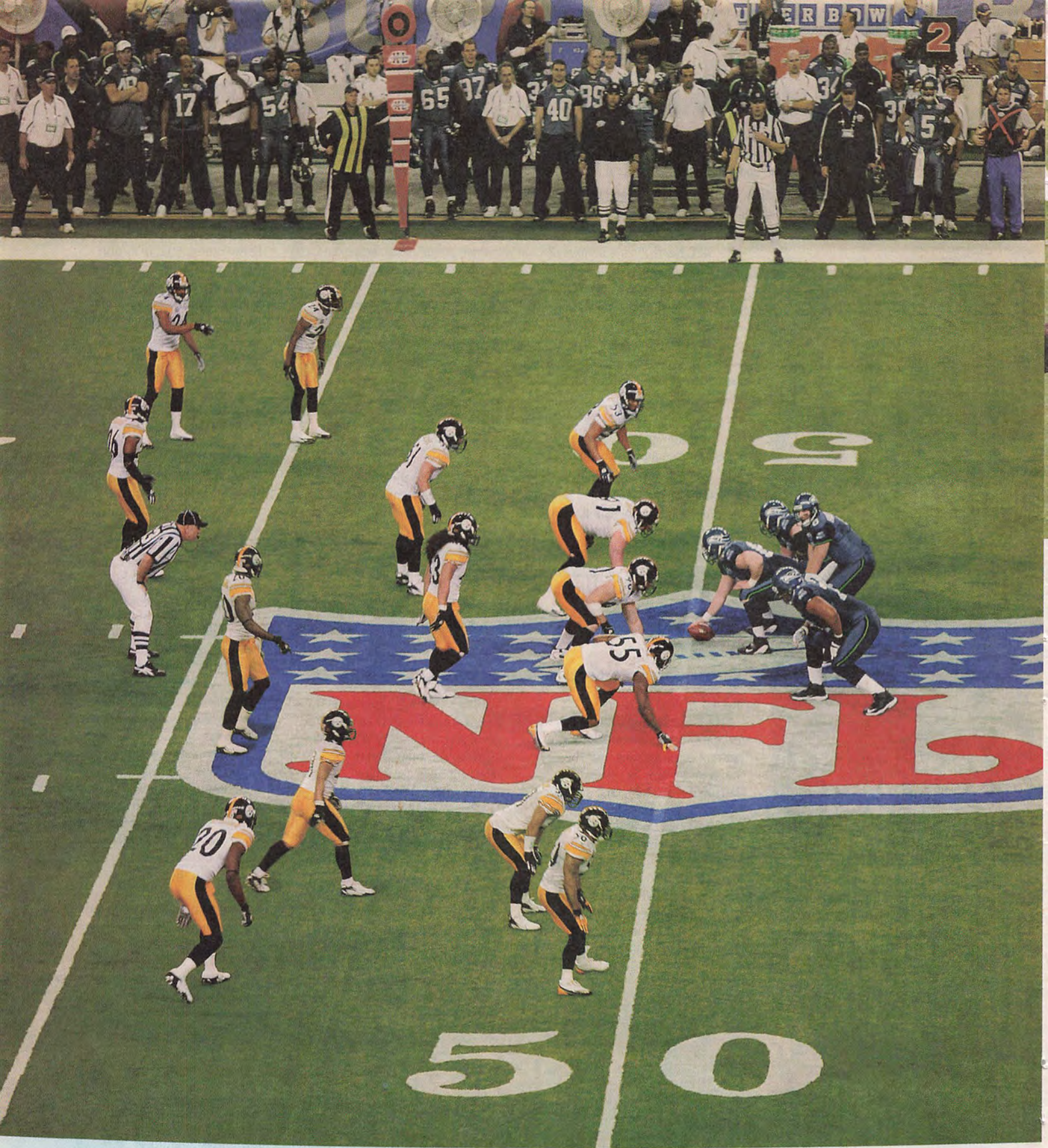
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THE STUFF INSIDE MATTERS MOST.

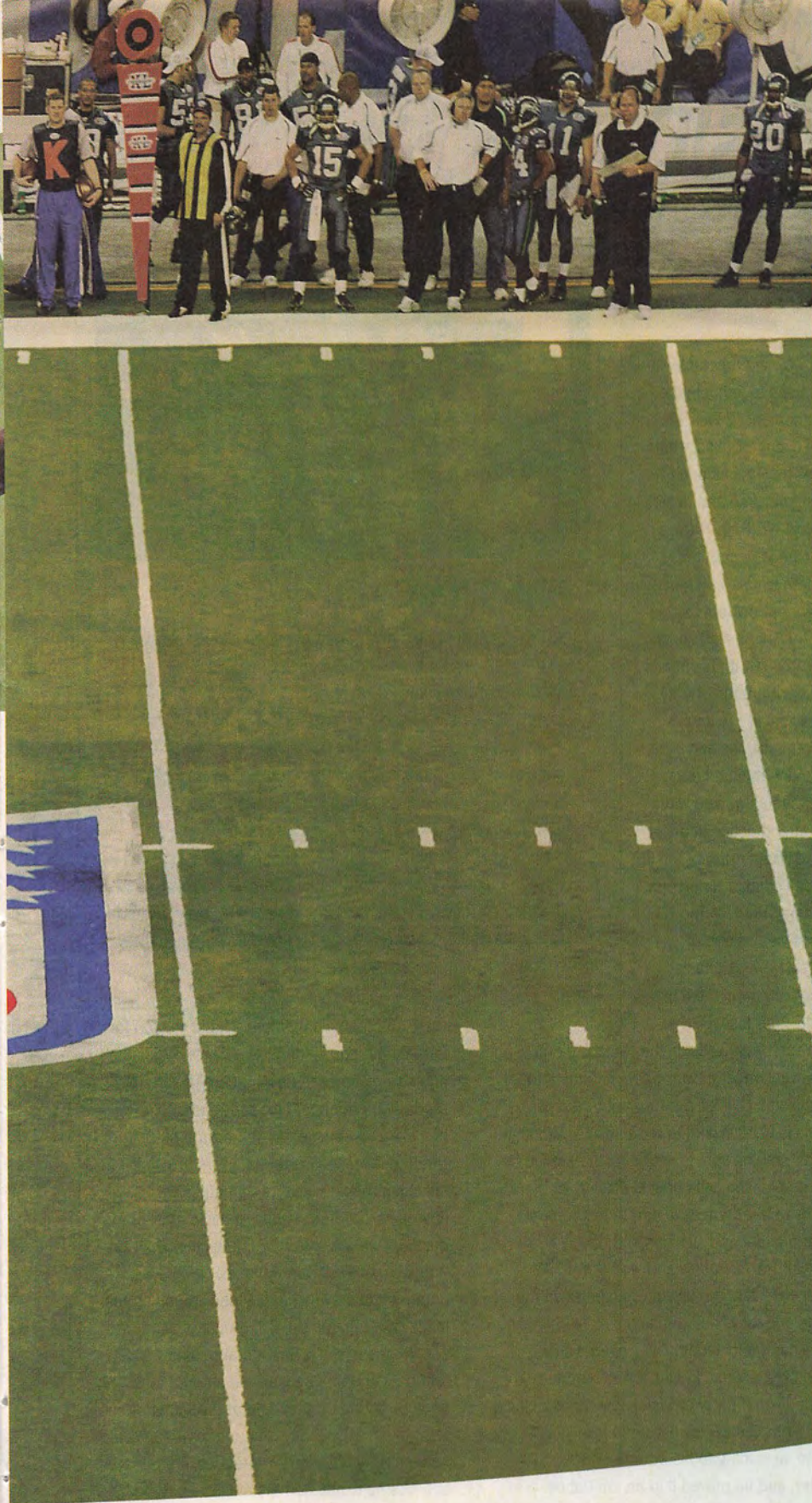






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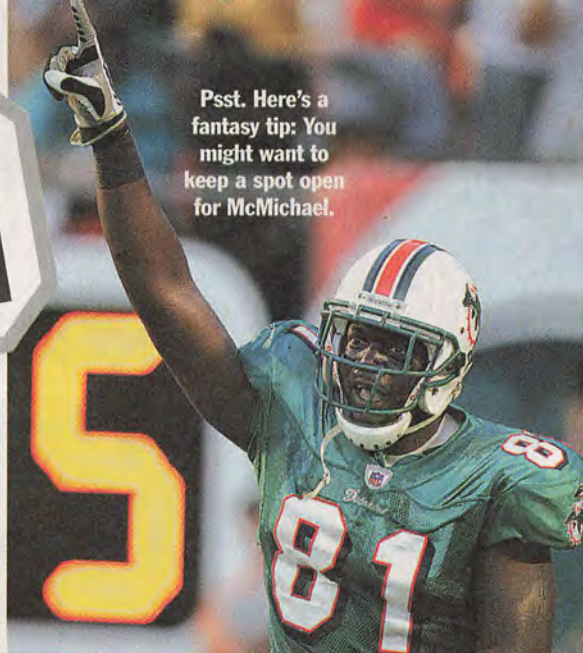
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## INSIDE DISH

Have T.O. and mentor ever been used together in the same sentence? Well, they're being used in Dallas, where **Terrell Owens** has been lending his time and expertise to fellow WR **Sam Hurd**, a rookie free agent out of Northern Illinois who has been the star of Cowboys camp. Hurd has impressed coach **Bill Parcells** with his hands and concentration and by learning all of the team's receiver positions and minimizing mental errors. T.O. often has worked with Hurd after practice and passed along many of the tips he received as a young player from **Jerry Rice**. > The Falcons' acquisition of WR **Ashley Lelie** affects **Michael Jenkins** more than

anyone. After losing **Brian Finneran** for the season, the Falcons didn't have a wide receiver who was a natural fit to play the slot. Lelie also doesn't fit that profile, so Jenkins is being asked to move inside. Although Jenkins' starting spot is not being threatened by Lelie, one reason Lelie prefers playing for the Falcons to the Broncos is he'd rather compete for playing time with Jenkins and **Roddy White** than with **Javon Walker** and **Rod Smith**. > In the process of the ugly divorce between the Vikings and former VP of personnel **Fran Foley**, this piece of dirty laundry was aired: Foley falsified his resume. In fact, it was reported repeatedly that Foley even acknowledged doing so. One problem: Foley never did falsify his resume, according to his attorney, **Jeffrey Kessler**, and he proved it in an arbitration hearing. Foley is sitting out the 2006 season and is believed to be collecting part of his salary from the Vikings. He hopes to get back in the NFL > Redskins assistant head coach/defense

Psst. Here's a fantasy tip: You might want to keep a spot open for McMichael.



WILFREDO LEE / AP

## FANTASYspin

Fantasy football owners might want to put an asterisk next to the name of **Randy McMichael** on their draft lists. The Dolphins' tight end could have a career year for a number of reasons. He never has had a quarterback as good as **Daunte Culpepper** throwing to him. Miami's coaches are more comfortable using McMichael on pass routes because they now have TE **Justin Peelle** to handle the grunt work. McMichael also worked harder in the offseason than he had previously. He was in the weight room shortly after last season ended, he took up boxing, and he did a lot of hill work. He also gave up fried food and junk food. The result: McMichael gained 10 pounds and cut his body fat by 10 percent. Teammates say he looks faster and more explosive.

**Gregg Williams** is predicting a big season for free-agent acquisition **Andre Carter**. Williams plans to make Carter a wild card of sorts by playing him at either end spot and deploying him like a linebacker on some zone blitzes. The Redskins see Carter as a rare physical specimen because he has a defensive lineman's size but the lean muscle mass and quick-twitch makeup of a linebacker. > Bears WR **Muhsin Muhammad** is taking a new approach to staying healthy and extending his longevity. Muhammad, 33, dropped close to 10 pounds in the offseason and is now a svelte 212. He has eased the strain on his body by taking off a couple of days in camp, skipping a preseason game and trying to avoid unnecessary collisions in practice. Muhammad believes he exhausted his muscles and beat himself up in camp earlier in his career. His focus now is on being in as close to peak condition as he can for 16 games and the postseason.

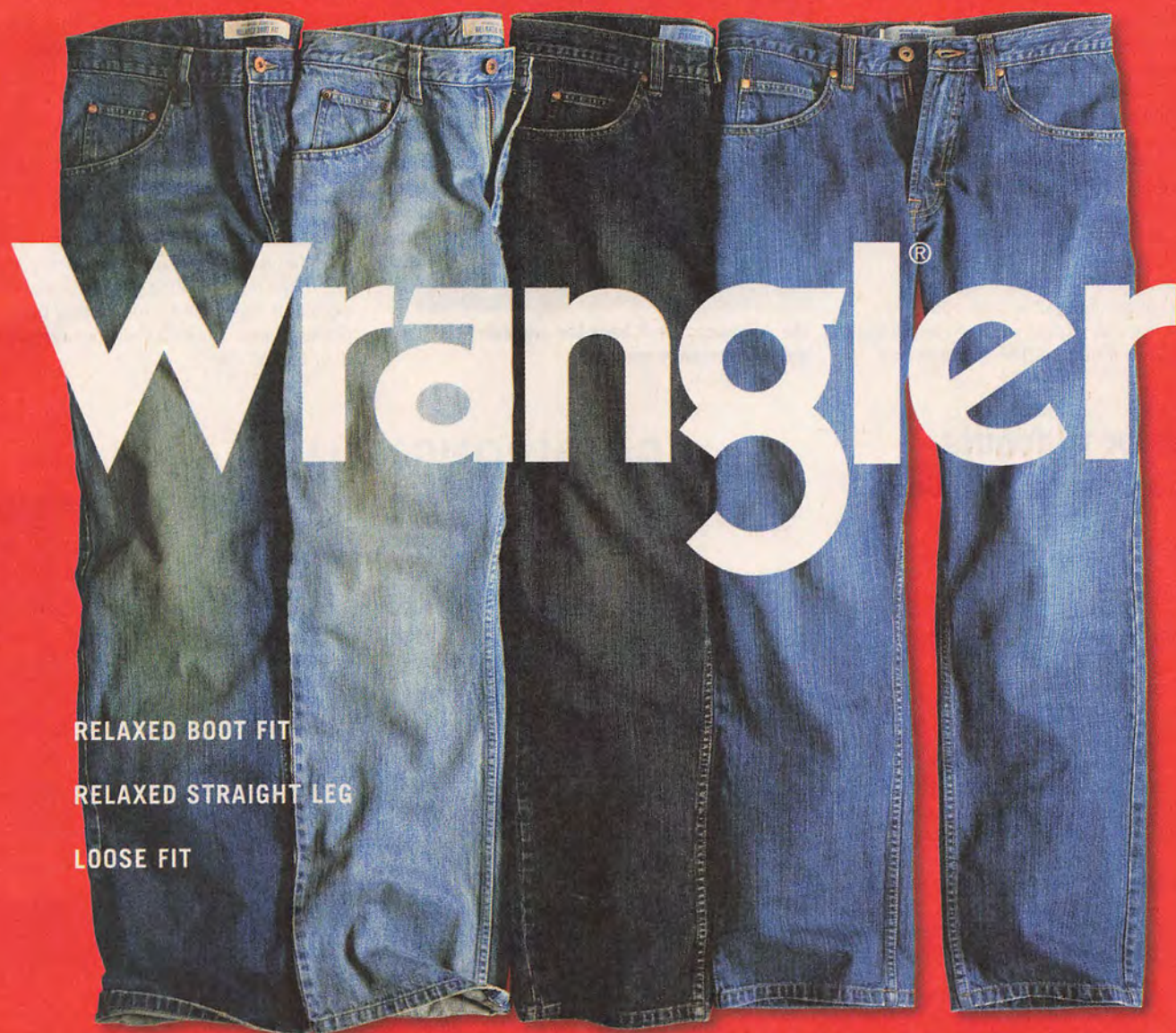




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# Fantasy Source

## Reggie a quick pick? That's just dumb



By Rob Hurtt

Reggie Bush hadn't even completed the opening quarter of his NFL debut before fantasy owners were drooling. Did you see that 44-yard ramble around the Titans' defense? Of course you did. The play ran in a constant loop on highlight shows for the next two days.

*Reggie! Reggie!*

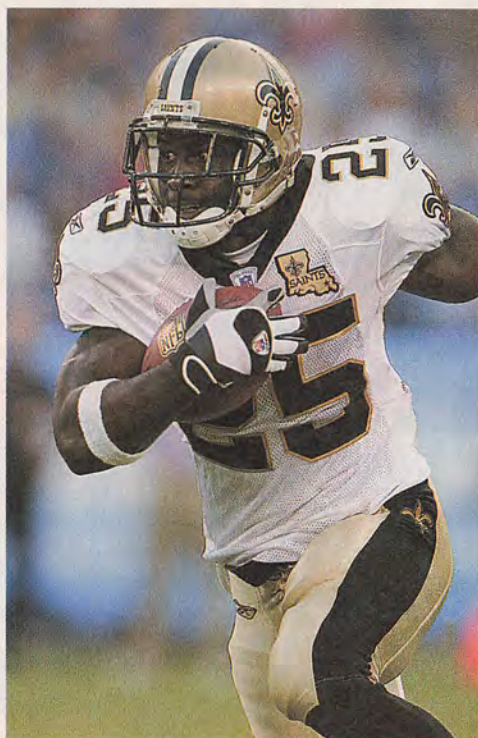
His second game—a prime-time, nationally televised event—tempered the enthusiasm only slightly.

Although Bush won't go in the first round in any serious drafts—only in ones done on ESPN by former NFL players—regular fantasy owners will start considering him as early as Round 2. I wouldn't draft him until the fourth.

Why am I not buying the hype?

Let's pretend you recently bought an \$80,000 sports car. Are you going to use it for your upcoming cross-country trip with the family? Heavens, no. Not only was the car not built for that purpose, it shouldn't have miles put on it needlessly.

The Saints drafted the most explosive player in college football in quite some time. He's the ideal star around which New Orleans can rebuild its franchise. The Saints are not



The Saints can't roll back the odometer on this high-performance machine.

going to abuse him by exposing him to excessive wear as a rookie. Veteran Deuce McAllister will share the load.

The Saints also are not going to ask Bush to do something for which he's not built. Bush did not get the goal-line touches at USC; LenDale White did. Bush will not get the goal-line touches in New Orleans; McAllister will. Without those chances, Bush will have to break big plays to score. He certainly is capable of doing that but not on a weekly basis.

Not all of Bush's games will be against defenses he can run circles around. Tennessee (29th in scoring defense last season) will be about as easy as it gets. In fact, Bush and the Saints have the second-toughest 2006 schedule according to Fantasy Source's schedule power poll. They get two games apiece against their NFC South brethren: Carolina, Atlanta and Tampa Bay. They play all four NFC East teams. They face Baltimore, Pittsburgh, San Francisco ... OK, it's not all doom and gloom, but it's close.

No doubt, Bush will make some spectacular runs and have huge games as a rookie. He'll be one of the most exciting players to watch. Does that make him a No. 1 fantasy back—a player around whom fantasy owners can build their teams? Hardly.

## All in for wideouts Top 25 players breakdown

**QBs**

**RBs**

**WRs**

**2005\***



**2006\*\***



The makeup of the first two rounds in fantasy drafts has changed this season. The number of elite wide receivers has increased with the emergence of Steve Smith, Larry Fitzgerald and Anquan Boldin. They've joined Chad Johnson, Torry Holt, Marvin Harrison, Terrell Owens and Randy Moss. Tight end Antonio Gates also makes the top 25.

Conversely, Peyton Manning is the only early-round quarterback, and the second tier of running backs includes several players who would be taken higher but are injury risks, such as Brian Westbrook.

\*According to rankings in the 2005 Fantasy Football Owners Manual

\*\*According to last week's rankings on Fantasy Source

## GRIDIRON GURUS



Roger Kuznia



Brendan Roberts



George Winkler

	Roger Kuznia	Brendan Roberts	George Winkler
<b>More TDs: L.J. or Shaun</b>	L.J.	Shaun	Shaun
<b>Peyton's TD passes</b>	35	30	33
<b>Bustin' heads like Bettis</b>	T.J. Duckett, Redskins	Brandon Jacobs, Giants	LenDale White, Titans
<b>Next instant TD machine</b>	Braylon Edwards, Browns	Kevin Curtis, Rams	Matt Jones, Jaguars
<b>NFL Network: Yea or nay?</b>	Yea	Yea	Nay

### STAT PROJECTIONS QB Passing yards • Total TDs • Interceptions

<b>FS</b>	<b>1. Peyton Manning</b> 4,237 • 30 • 10	<b>2. Tom Brady</b> 3,917 • 28 • 14	<b>3. Carson Palmer</b> 3,672 • 29 • 13	<b>4. Matt Hasselbeck</b> 3,510 • 26 • 12	<b>5. Donovan McNabb</b> 3,351 • 24 • 10	<b>6. Marc Bulger</b> 3,614 • 25 • 13	<b>7. Daunte Culpepper</b> 3,671 • 23 • 14
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If you draft Redskins WR **Santana Moss**, expect him to be inconsistent. He had 720 yards and eight touchdowns in his five 100-yard receiving games last season; in the other 11 games, he netted 763 yards and one score.

BOB LEVERONE / SN

**FANTASY DISH**

A promising development for **Willie Parker** owners: The Steelers plan to use him in the red zone. If Fast Willie can learn to burrow straight ahead near the goal line, he will have a shot at double-digit TDs. ➤ Avoid Steelers WR **Santonio Holmes** and Patriots WR **Chad Jackson**; both have been struggling. The Packers' **Greg Jennings** is the only rookie wideout worth a pick in nonkeeper leagues. ➤ Browns RB **Reuben Droughns** scored just two TDs last season, but he's a fine pick in yardage leagues—his touches probably will increase because he'll be QB **Charlie Frye**'s security blanket. Droughns averaged 21.8 touches last season. ➤ It's wise to dance around the Jets' uninspiring quarterbacks and running backs, and here's a concern for individual defensive player leagues: New York's new 3-4 defense will require ILB **Jonathan Vilma** to fight through guards, which will reduce his playmaking potential. —Vinnie Iyer

## RANKINGS Defenses

- 1 Chicago Bears
- 2 Pittsburgh Steelers
- 3 Carolina Panthers
- 4 Tampa Bay Buccaneers
- 5 Indianapolis Colts
- 6 Seattle Seahawks
- 7 New England Patriots
- 8 Baltimore Ravens
- 9 Jacksonville Jaguars
- 10 New York Giants
- 11 San Diego Chargers
- 12 Dallas Cowboys
- 13 Washington Redskins
- 14 Miami Dolphins
- 15 Philadelphia Eagles
- 16 Atlanta Falcons
- 17 Denver Broncos
- 18 Buffalo Bills
- 19 Kansas City Chiefs
- 20 Minnesota Vikings
- 21 Cincinnati Bengals
- 22 Cleveland Browns
- 23 Arizona Cardinals
- 24 Detroit Lions
- 25 Green Bay Packers
- 26 St. Louis Rams
- 27 Tennessee Titans
- 28 New York Jets
- 29 Oakland Raiders
- 30 Houston Texans
- 31 San Francisco 49ers
- 32 New Orleans Saints

JAMES BY ROBERT SEALE / SN; BROWN BY BOB LEVERONE / SN

## BLOG ALERT

**I had hoped Carson Palmer would fall to my spot at the end of the fourth round. When he was there, I bit.**

Will Rob Hurtt's pick pay off? Well, even in an experts league, someone has to finish last. Rate all the selections at [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com).

## Judgment calls

**Dolphins RB Ronnie Brown vs. Cardinals RB Edgerrin James.** James goes from one loaded offense to another, though the Cards' line is a concern. Brown no longer has to share carries with Ricky Williams.

**Verdict:** James. He has no durability issues. It's unknown whether Brown can carry the full load.

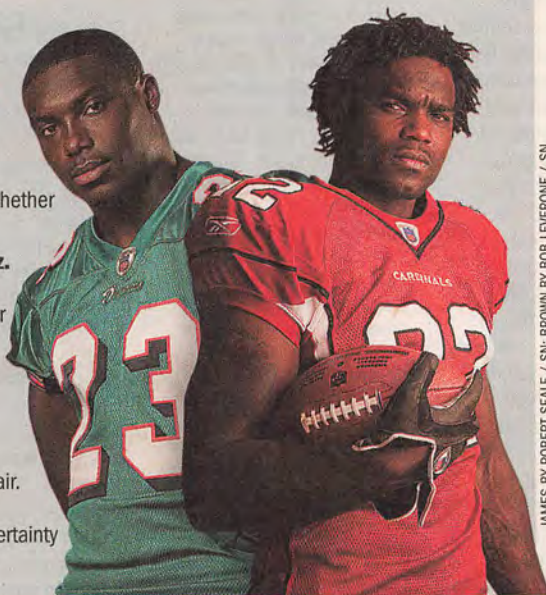
**Giants TE Jeremy Shockey vs. Chiefs TE Tony Gonzalez.** Shockey scored five more touchdowns than Gonzalez in 2005, but Gonzalez has averaged more yards per game over the past three seasons.

**Verdict:** Gonzalez. Before '05, he had six straight seasons with at least six TDs. He'll rebound.

**Ravens WR Derrick Mason vs. Bengals WR T.J. Houshmandzadeh.** Mason has put up five consecutive

1,000-yard seasons and has been reunited with Steve McNair. No team threw more TD passes than Cincinnati last year.

**Verdict:** Mason. His status as Baltimore's No. 1 and the uncertainty about Carson Palmer in Cincy give Mason the edge. —R.K.



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AFC  
EAST

## SCOUTS VIEWS



CHRIS OWEN/AA / AP

The Jets would be wise to keep Pennington's pass attempts short and sweet.

**PATRIOTS** It's hard to say they are starting to show signs of slipping until it really happens. They've lost some key guys, but they lose key guys every year. As long as they have that quarterback and coach, they're going to be pretty good. ... **Ben Watson** is a tough mismatch at tight end. He's a 4.5 guy who's about 6-3½, 255. He's too fast for linebackers and too big for safeties. ... **Kevin Faulk** is a big part of what they do in terms of being a change-of-pace, third-down back. **DOLPHINS** I think they're the team to beat in this division. They just need another back to complement **Ronnie Brown**. It's pretty hard for one back to carry the load. ... In the last couple of years, they haven't been a threat as a passing team. Now, with **Daunte Culpepper**, the threat of the deep ball becomes a factor. ... They're going to have a whole new crew in the secondary. It'll be interesting to see how that holds up. **BILLS** The quarterback situation is not real good. **J.P. Losman** has all the skills in the world. It just depends on how much he can pick up the new offense. **Kelly Holcomb** is probably the safe pick, but he doesn't have the arm to go downfield like Losman. ... **Aaron Schobel** is a really good player at end, but you don't hear a lot about him. He plays with a real high motor and is good both playing the run and rushing the passer. **JETS** **Chad Pennington** may surprise people every now and then with a deep ball, but he's not a deep-ball thrower. His only way of surviving is if the Jets use a lot of short, quick, rhythm passes. ... **Kimo von Oelhoffen** is a try-hard guy who will do all the dirty work at nose tackle, but I don't see him replacing **John Abraham**. He's a decent player but not spectacular. He doesn't scare me.

Predicted finish: 1 Patriots 12-4\* 2 Dolphins 11-5\* 3 Bills 7-9 4 Jets 3-13

1 New England  
PATRIOTS

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** QB Tom Brady is in his prime and motivated to win a fourth Super Bowl after the Patriots fell short in 2005. He spent the offseason working out hard and honing his fundamentals, such as getting his hand on top of the ball so his deep throws float instead of dive. Brady means business. And after having a sports hernia repaired, he's in good physical condition and presumably at his peak mentally. This team has more questions than usual, but **Bill Belichick** won't panic. His steady hand quells locker room discord. He is a terrific game manager who is masterful at putting players in positions to thrive. The re-signing of RE **Richard Seymour** erases a distraction and keeps an excellent line intact. Seymour, LE **Ty Warren** and NT **Vince Wilfork** are as good as any defensive front in the NFL. Look for the Patriots to benefit from a schedule that includes four division games against the rebuilding Jets and Bills, four matchups against the weak NFC North and games against the Texans and Titans.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** There are problems at wide receiver. **David Givens** is gone, and **Deion Branch** (holdout) and rookie **Chad Jackson** (injury) were absent almost all of camp. Chargers castoff **Reche Caldwell** had an average camp and isn't suited to be a No. 1 receiver. Finding a capable inside

linebacker to play next to **Tedy Bruschi** has been a problem. **Monty Beisel**'s struggles caused the team to sign **Junior Seau**, 37. **Mike Vrabel** may have to move inside, though he is most comfortable outside. Bruschi may not be able to start right away because of a broken wrist. **Adam Vinatieri**, who may be the best clutch kicker in NFL history, is gone, and rookie **Steve Gostkowski** will have to make pressure kicks and master the tricky conditions at Gillette Stadium.

**CURRAN'S BOTTOM LINE:** It may be rocky at times, but the Patriots will remain an elite team. Look for the terrific talent at tight end and the running back combo of **Corey Dillon** and **Laurence Maroney** to offset the wide receiver issues. Mentally, no team is tougher, which is why the Patriots will be a threat to play again in February. —Tom Curran



BOB LEVERONE / SN

STARTING LINEUP  
OFFENSE

WR	Reche Caldwell	2
LT	Matt Light	3
LG	Logan Mankins	4
C	Dan Koppen	4
RG	Stephen Neal	4
RT	Ryan O'Callaghan	3
TE	Ben Watson	4
WR	Troy Brown	2
QB	Tom Brady	5
FB	Heath Evans	2
RB	Corey Dillon	3

## DEFENSE

LE	Ty Warren	4
NT	Vince Wilfork	4
RE	Richard Seymour	5
OLB	Mike Vrabel	4
ILB	Tedy Bruschi	4
ILB	Junior Seau	3
OLB	Rosevelt Colvin	3
CB	Asante Samuel	2
CB	Ellis Hobbs	3
SS	Rodney Harrison	4
FS	Eugene Wilson	4

## SPECIALISTS

K	Steve Gostkowski	2
P	Josh Miller	4
KR	Willie Andrews	2
PR	Willie Andrews	2
LS	Lonie Paxton	4

Players rated 1-5,  
with 5 highest

SNAPSHOT  
with CB Ellis Hobbs

**Beware of this guy in the locker room:** Randall "Blue" Gay. He makes collages in my locker and leaves little idols. He's been banned from my locker.

**Favorite way to spend my day off:** Washing my cars. I have an '04 GMC Yukon—it's a trophy truck that actually won a couple of shows—and I have an '05 Cadillac Deville DTS. Those are my kids. They ride smooth.

**Can't-miss weekly dining tradition:** New England clam chowder from the Patriots' cafeteria.

**Unique vanity plate:** "IM A BOSS." That's kind of corny. That's Corey Dillon's.

**Huddle moment:** During the playoff game last year against Jacksonville, somebody farted. It was ridiculous. It was like a muddle-huddle. We couldn't even get in tight.

**Unique locker:** Corey Dillon's. We were back for a day and a half, and it was filled to capacity. Clothes, trash, everything. I think there are rats and bears in there.

**Most wired:** Dante Scarnecchia (offensive line coach). That boy is swearing at everybody. For someone so little, that guy has some spark.

**Rookie dues:** They are here to serve. Getting us food, getting us water. Shaving one eyebrow for our amusement, telling us jokes when we're tired. Anything.



## STAT PROJECTIONS QB Passing yards • Total TDs • Interceptions

FS	8. Eli Manning	9. Jake Delhomme	10. Kurt Warner	11. Drew Brees	12. Michael Vick	13. Drew Bledsoe	14. Trent Green
	3,772 • 25 • 15	3,512 • 25 • 15	2,740 • 15 • 10	3,460 • 24 • 15	2,558 • 20 • 12	3,570 • 24 • 15	3,827 • 21 • 13

\*projected playoff team





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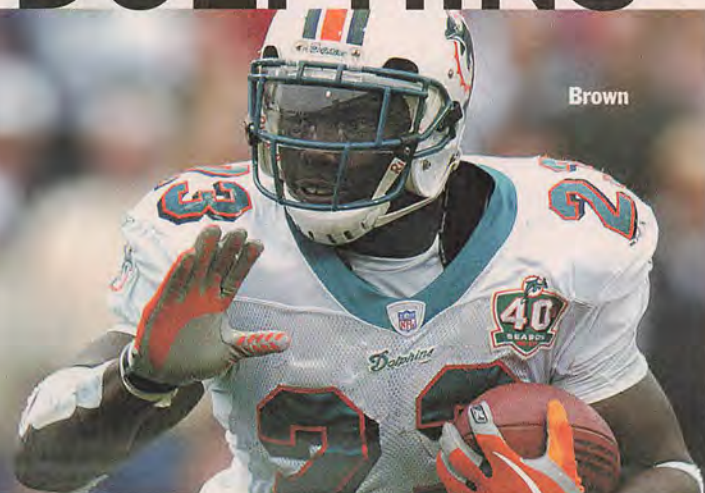
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## 2 Miami DOLPHINS



Brown

BILL WIPPERT FOR SN

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** RB **Ronnie Brown** has looked exceptional in camp and is poised for a breakout year. He believes he can carry the load in the backfield by himself; he didn't have the chance to do it while backing up **Cadillac Williams** at Auburn and sharing the backfield with **Ricky Williams** as a rookie last season. Brown added muscle in the offseason but has the same explosive first step. Look for him to catch more passes, too. The defensive line may be old—all four starters and the two key backups are 30 or older—but it still is tenacious and can get to the quarterback. The group returns almost intact from last season, when the club tied a franchise record with 49 sacks. Miami is 3-8 in its past 11 December road games, but it likely won't have the late-season blues this year; it has three home games in December and a game at the RCA Dome in Indianapolis. The lone cold-weather game is December 17 at Buffalo.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** Despite offseason changes, glaring problems remain in the secondary. The newcomers—rookie S **Jason Allen**, CBs **Will Allen** and **Andre' Goodman** and FS **Renaldo Hill**—haven't shown they are any better than the players they replaced. The offensive line will look much different, but will it be improved? **Rex Hadnot** is moving from right guard to center, and free-agent pickup **L.J. Shelton** has replaced **Damion McIntosh** at left tackle. The unit needs to mesh quickly to properly protect

QB **Daunte Culpepper**, who needs to show his surgically repaired knee can withstand a full season. If Brown suffers an injury, the team will turn to **Sammy Morris**. He is a capable backup, but the offense could be in trouble if he has to be the primary back.

**DARLINGTON'S BOTTOM LINE:** A healthy roster and good chemistry likely will help the Dolphins climb back to elite status, but they still have plenty to prove before they can be considered Super Bowl contenders. Miami ended last season on a six-game winning streak, but the Dolphins beat only one playoff team during that run—New England—and the Patriots were using backups by halftime. —Jeff Darlington

### SNAPSHOT with C Rex Hadnot

**Huddle moment:** Seth McKinney split his chin open (in 2004), and he had this big pool of blood on his jersey. He didn't want to come out of the game, but the refs wouldn't let him stay with all of that blood pouring everywhere. He was trippin'.

**Unique vanity plate:** Geno James' plate says "BLOCKMASTER." I don't remember how he spells it, but that's how it reads.

**Worst thing about our locker room:** The offensive line doesn't have enough space. We've got the same size lockers as the punters. We're big dudes.

**Cheapest teammate:** Seth McKinney wears the same khaki shorts and the same rock 'n' roll shirt every day. The guy only has one outfit.

**Most wired:** Tim Davis (assistant offensive line coach) must hook himself up to an outlet at night. He's always charged up.

**Can't-miss weekly dining tradition:** Betty's Soul Food. I go there every other night. I eat baked chicken, cabbage, fried okra, and I might get some corn or some sweet potatoes.

**Unique lockers:** The rookies'. That's where we put all of the big radios and stereos. That's some nice equipment.

**My body on Monday morning:** Broken.

**Favorite way to spend my day off:** Chillin' with my little girl. She's 5 months old now, so I'm still buying her toys all the time.



### STARTING LINEUP

#### OFFENSE

WR	Chris Chambers	5
LT	L.J. Shelton	3
LG	Jeno James	3
C	Rex Hadnot	3
RG	Bennie Anderson	2
RT	Vernon Carey	3
TE	Randy McMichael	4
WR	Marty Booker	3
QB	Daunte Culpepper	4
FB	Fred Beasley	2
RB	Ronnie Brown	4

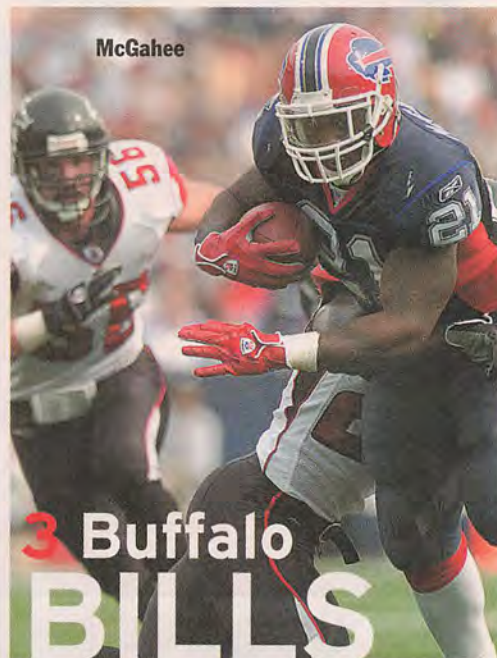
#### DEFENSE

LE	Kevin Carter	3
DT	Vonnie Holliday	3
DT	Keith Traylor	3
RE	Jason Taylor	5
OLB	Donnie Spragan	2
MLB	Zach Thomas	5
OLB	Channing Crowder	3
CB	Will Allen	2
CB	Andre' Goodman	2
SS	Travares Tillman	2
FS	Renaldo Hill	2

#### SPECIALISTS

K	Olindo Mare	4
P	Donnie Jones	3
KR	Wes Welker	4
PR	Wes Welker	4
LS	John Denney	2

Players rated 1-5, with 5 highest



McGahee

DAVID DUROCHIK FOR SN

## 3 Buffalo BILLS

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** Coaches plan to use RB **Willis McGahee** more as a receiver and take advantage

### STARTING LINEUP

#### OFFENSE

WR	Lee Evans	4
LT	Mike Gandy	3
LG	Tutan Reyes	2
C	Melvin Fowler	2
RG	Chris Villarrial	2
RT	Jason Peters	3
TE	Robert Royal	3
WR	Peerless Price	2
QB	J.P. Losman	2
FB	Daimon Shelton	3
RB	Willis McGahee	4

#### DEFENSE

LE	Chris Kelsay	2
DT	Larry Tripplett	3
DT	Tim Anderson	2
RE	Aaron Schobel	4
OLB	Takeo Spikes	5
MLB	London Fletcher	4
OLB	Angelo Crowell	3
CB	Terrence McGee	3
CB	Nate Clements	5
SS	Donte Whitner	3
FS	Troy Vincent	4

#### SPECIALISTS

K	Rian Lindell	4
P	Brian Moorman	5
KR	Terrence McGee	5
PR	Roscoe Parrish	4
LS	Mike Schneck	5

Players rated 1-5, with 5 highest


of his speed by running more sweeps and off-tackle plays. His 61-yard touchdown in the exhibition season might indicate McGahee has regained the breakaway speed he had before his knee injury in 2003. By getting him the ball in space more, the team believes explosive plays will follow. OLB **Takeo Spikes** has recovered from a torn Achilles' and has looked good in drills; he's showing lateral movement and quickness. Spikes, MLB **London Fletcher** and OLB **Angelo Crowell** will form one of the NFL's best linebacker trios. **Lee Evans** is ready to be the team's No. 1 receiver. He has reliable hands, great body control and breakaway speed.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** QB **J.P. Losman** won the starting job but must prove he can be consistent. Losman has a strong arm and his mobility allows him to keep plays alive, but he is prone to erratic play. Pass protection is a concern. Losman will avoid some sacks with his legs, but

### STAT PROJECTIONS QB Passing yards • Total TDs • Interceptions

<b>FS</b>	15. Jake Plummer	16. Ben Roethlisberger	17. Aaron Brooks	18. Brett Favre	19. Byron Leftwich	20. Steve McNair	21. David Carr
	3,370 • 21 • 11	3,093 • 21 • 12	3,623 • 21 • 16	3,631 • 22 • 20	3,040 • 19 • 9	2,581 • 18 • 8	3,471 • 18 • 13





Pictured from left to right: LCDR Mark Simon, ETCM Eric Olis, BMC Dan Ames, BM1 Michael O'Connell,  
EN1 Jason Fetterman, EM2 Mark DiPietro, LT Lewis Baker, MM2 Sergio Rodriguez

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the line is susceptible to bull rushes up the middle and has trouble dealing with elite speed rushers. The team can't afford injuries on the line because there isn't much depth. The new defensive philosophy calls for linemen who are quick enough to penetrate gaps and disrupt plays in the backfield, but the front four's lack of size could be a problem when the team faces power running teams with big, physical blockers. Besides Evans, the Bills don't have much they can count on at receiver. **Peerless Price** is coming off disappointing seasons in Atlanta and Dallas. **Josh Reed** hasn't lived up to his second-round status. **Roscoe Parrish's** rookie year was ruined by a broken wrist.

**WILSON'S BOTTOM LINE:** This is a rebuilding year. The quarterback position isn't solidified, both lines have much to prove, and the team is learning new schemes. The Bills appear to be at least another year away from ending their playoff drought. —Allen Wilson

## SNAPSHOT

with OLB Takeo Spikes

**Favorite way to spend my day off:** Sitting by the pool at my house at 5:30 when the sun starts to go down. I put on a little Otis Redding and Johnnie Taylor and just watch my little girl go swimming.



**Most memorable slobberknocker:** The one where I hit Reggie Williams so hard it knocked his helmet off. After he went down, I looked down at Reggie and said, "Go to sleep."

**Rookie duos:** During the season, they must have coffee on our desks. Fletch (London Fletcher) likes his with two hazelnut creams and some sugar. I like one hazelnut and two sugars, and I like to have my spoon sitting parallel beside the coffee.

**Road trip I like most:** Cincinnati has been good to me. I've always had good games against those guys. There's so much hype surrounding my returning there. I'm an energy guy, so just what the crowd brings along fires me up. I feed off that.

**Funniest trash-talker:** Out of all the trash-talkers, I like Steve Smith because he's straight to it. He'll tell you, "All right now. Be careful what you ask for." Or he'll say, "When you get home, your kids will know my first and last name." He doesn't pull punches. He will cut you to the bone.

## 4 New York JETS

### STARTING LINEUP

#### OFFENSE

WR	Laveranues Coles	3
LT	D'Brickshaw Ferguson	3
LG	Pete Kendall	3
C	Nick Mangold	3
RG	Brandon Moore	3
RT	Anthony Clement	2
TE	Chris Baker	3
WR	Jerricho Cotchery	2
QB	Chad Pennington	3
FB	B.J. Askew	2
RB	Kevan Barlow	2

#### DEFENSE

LE	Shaun Ellis	4
NT	Kimo von Oelhoffen	3
RE	Dewayne Robertson	3
OLB	Bryan Thomas	3
ILB	Jonathan Vilma	5
ILB	Eric Barton	3
OLB	Matt Chatham	2
CB	Andre Dyson	3
CB	Justin Miller	3
SS	Erik Coleman	3
FS	Kerry Rhodes	4

#### SPECIALISTS

K	Mike Nugent	3
P	Ben Graham	4
KR	Justin Miller	4
PR	Tim Dwight	3
LS	James Dearth	3

Players rated 1-5, with 5 highest

### REASONS FOR OPTIMISM: QB Chad Pennington

is making a better than expected recovery from a second surgery on his shoulder. His arm strength remains average, but he's throwing with more velocity and accuracy than he did a year ago, when he was struggling to recover from the first surgery.

The offensive line, a major weakness last season, has nice potential. LT **D'Brickshaw Ferguson** and C **Nick Mangold**, two rookies, are solid building blocks. Ferguson is an elite athlete with a chance to become a shutdown pass protector. Mangold is a heady player with better than advertised athletic ability. The young secondary could be very good. FS **Kerry Rhodes** and CB **Justin Miller** are fast and athletic.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** The Jets don't have any offensive players who will force defensive coordinators to adjust their game plans. That will put extreme pressure on Pennington and the line. One question that remains with Pennington is whether he can get the ball to the perimeter, especially on deep outs. If he can't, opposing defenses will pack the middle and take away his favorite throwing lanes. **Kevan Barlow** and **Derrick Byalock** are capable backs, but they lack home run ability. At wideout, the Jets have a group of tough possession receivers, but none can stretch the field. Rookie WR **Brad Smith**, a former college quarterback, has breakaway ability as a runner, but he's raw as a receiver. The team traded its best pass rusher, RE **John Abraham**, to the Falcons, which created a major void. LE **Shaun Ellis** has double-digit sack potential, but he's a power rusher who isn't going to attract many double-teams. The defense faces a tough transition to the 3-4 because the personnel fits better in a 4-3. But coach **Eric Mangini** is hellbent on playing the scheme he used with New England. Neither **Dewayne Robertson** nor **Kimo von Oelhoffen** is a natural nose tackle, **Bryan Thomas** never has played outside linebacker, and **Jonathan Vilma** could struggle at inside linebacker. In the 3-4, Vilma won't have two big tackles keeping blockers off him.

**CIMINI'S BOTTOM LINE:** Sorry, not this year. The Jets simply aren't equipped to win now. This year is all about building a foundation for the future, establishing Mangini's philosophy and finding the players who buy into it. —Rich Cimini



## JETS SNAPSHOT

with FS Kerry Rhodes

**Weirdest pregame ritual:** Ray Mickens'. He does a funny little dance to get loose. He gets down, and he has to rub his knees because he's so old.

**Funniest trash-talker:** Sam Madison from the Giants. I know Sam from Louisville, and we're always talking. He doesn't shut up at all.

**Huddle moment:** Against Kansas City in the 2005 opener, the first drive of the season we gave up a big run on two downs and Dewayne Robertson went into a rant. He was screaming and hollering. All of a sudden, he stopped and said, "My bad, I'm sorry." He snapped back into his right mind.

**Unique locker:** Kimo von Oelhoffen's. He's got about 20 cell phones in his locker, with cords and stuff everywhere—a lot of electronic stuff.

**Player I most hate to play against:** LaDainian Tomlinson. He's a beast to tackle one-on-one. He gave me nightmares last year.

**Most wired:** Bryan Cox (assistant defensive line coach). He's definitely the most wired. He cusses everybody out—it doesn't matter who it is. That's him; that's his personality.

**Bet you didn't know this about Eric Mangini:** That he really has a personality. He's not just a monotone guy.



### STAT PROJECTIONS QB Passing yards • Total TDs • Interceptions

<b>FS</b>	22. Chris Simms	23. Philip Rivers	24. Mark Brunell	25. Jon Kitna	26. Billy Volek	27. Brad Johnson	28. Chad Pennington
	3,010 • 16 • 12	3,056 • 18 • 16	2,438 • 15 • 7	2,765 • 14 • 13	2,777 • 15 • 13	3,141 • 15 • 11	2,168 • 13 • 10



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## N O R T H

## SCOUTS VIEWS

**STEELERS** I don't think **Hines Ward** gets enough credit. Great, I think, is used too often in this league. But he certainly is deserving of that label. ... You don't want to put **Ben Roethlisberger** in the upper echelon of quarterbacks, but the guy continues to make plays. It can be a tight situation and he'll scramble or roll out, break a tackle and hit somebody downfield. ... **Heath Miller** is going to emerge as one of the better complete tight ends.

**BENGALS** I think **Carson Palmer** will return to form and be even better. From a physical standpoint, I

think he'll be stronger. It's just a matter of getting over that injury from a mental standpoint. ... I like the running combination of **Rudi Johnson** and **Chris Perry**. Rudi's got good vision and hits the hole with power. Perry brings some versatility in that he can run inside or outside as well as catch the ball. ... What they'll miss with **Odell Thurman** not being at linebacker for the first four games

**Ward is a star, but for some reason, he isn't always called one.**

might be covered up by better defensive line play. **RAVENS** As far as experience, understanding the offense, accuracy, arm strength and mobility, **Steve McNair** still has all those things. The only question is if he can stay healthy for 16 games. ... **Jonathan Ogden** is still a good pass blocker, but he's not the run blocker he used to be. He's still one of the top 10 left tackles in the league, but I wouldn't put him in **Walter Jones'** class anymore. **BROWNS** I think **Charlie Frye** is going to be pretty good. He's not going to wow you with his arm, but he's got that intangible of not being overwhelmed by the situation and being able to create things. ... **Willie McGinest** was a huge pickup. He's going to bring a pass-rush presence and also that experience and championship mentality **Romeo Crennel** wants to have in Cleveland.

STARTING LINEUP  
OFFENSE

WR	Hines Ward	5
LT	Marvel Smith	4
LG	Alan Faneca	5
C	Jeff Hartings	5
RG	Kendall Simmons	2
RT	Max Starks	3
TE	Heath Miller	4
WR	Cedrick Wilson	2
QB	Ben Roethlisberger	5
FB	Dan Kreider	4
RB	Willie Parker	3

## DEFENSE

LE	Aaron Smith	4
NT	Casey Hampton	5
RE	Brett Keisel	3
OLB	Joey Porter	5
ILB	Larry Foote	3
ILB	James Farrior	4
OLB	Clark Haggans	4
CB	Ike Taylor	4
CB	Deshaea Townsend	3
SS	Troy Polamalu	5
FS	Ryan Clark	3

## SPECIALISTS

K	Jeff Reed	4
P	Chris Gardocki	2
KR	Santonio Holmes	2
PR	Willie Reid	3
LS	Greg Warren	2

Players rated 1-5,  
with 5 highest

the field and likely will be more productive, but the team will need to find another emotional leader.

**DULAC'S BOTTOM LINE:** As long as Roethlisberger stays healthy, the Steelers will be potent on offense because they can run and throw equally well. Couple that with an attacking defense and the ingredients are there for the Steelers to reach the AFC championship game for the third year in a row. —Gerry Dulac



## SNAPSHOT

with ILB **Larry Foote**

**Beware of these guys in the locker room:** You have to watch out for the kickers because they're always playing soccer. The ball will hit you in the head. Your head always has to be on a swivel in the locker room.

**Bet you didn't know this about Bill Cowher:** He's a bandwagon jumper. If the Miami Heat are winning, he goes with them. Whoever is winning, he always picks them.

**Funniest trash-talker:** Joey Porter. He talks about your mother, your grandmother, your kids—he's just crazy.

**Can't-miss weekly dining tradition:** For away games, we get Popeyes chicken the Saturday morning before we fly out. That's the best part.

**Player I most hate to play against:** Probably Tom Brady. We have a hard time beating him.

**Nobody knows this about Heinz Field:** As you enter the stadium on game day, you'll see at least five fights before the game. That's Steelers fans fighting each other or the other team's fans.

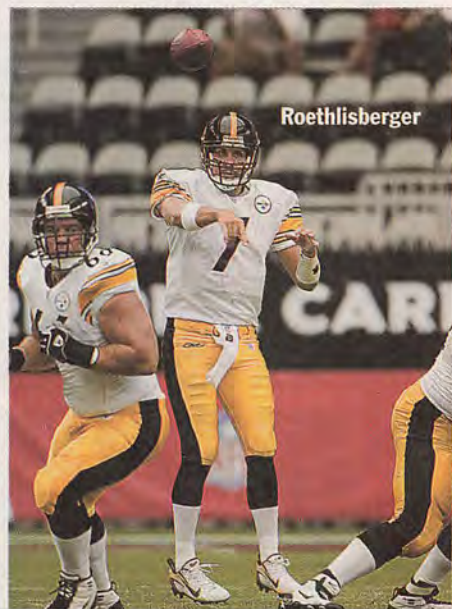
**Most wired:** You know it's coach Cowher, but for a teammate, probably Clark Haggans energywise.

**Huddle moment:** The San Diego game last year. We were about to fight with each other. Everyone was screaming at each other and the officials. It was funny, looking back, because everyone was arguing.

1 Pittsburgh  
STEELERS

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** With 19 starters returning—including all of the core players from last season's championship team—and no disruptions to the coaching staff, the Steelers don't have any significant weaknesses. QB **Ben Roethlisberger** appears to be recovered from his offseason motorcycle accident and, in his third season, will only get better. He proved in the playoffs he can win games with his arm. With Roethlisberger at the controls, the Steelers have the league's most balanced, diverse and efficient offense. Roethlisberger can throw deep to WR **Cedrick Wilson** and rookie WR **Santonio Holmes** and over the middle to WR **Hines Ward** and TE **Heath Miller**. And don't forget RB **Willie Parker**, a breakaway threat whose 4.7 yards per carry ranked second in the AFC among 1,000-yard rushers last season. The defense is deep in the secondary and is led by SS **Troy Polamalu**, who arguably is the best defensive player in the league. NT **Casey Hampton** is almost immovable, and OLB **Joey Porter** was the team's most disruptive defensive player in the postseason.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** Coach **Bill Cowher** is working hard to keep the team from becoming complacent. He has reminded the players they weren't necessarily the best team in 2005 but merely the best at the right moment. Obviously, a major injury to Roethlisberger would be a big hit. He brings so many intangibles to the position that quantifying his importance is almost impossible. **Charlie Batch** is a good backup, but he has a history of injuries and can't be relied upon to stay healthy for an extended stretch. The team will miss retired RB **Jerome Bettis'** powerful running in short-yardage situations, but it will miss him even more in the locker room. RB **Duce Staley** will replace Bettis on



Roethlisberger

MICHAEL McNAMARA / SN



## STAT PROJECTIONS RB Rushing yards • Receiving yards • Total TDs

<b>FS</b>	1. Larry Johnson	2. Shaun Alexander	3. LaDainian Tomlinson	4. Tiki Barber	5. Edgerrin James	6. Ronnie Brown	7. LaMont Jordan
	1,867 • 374 • 21	1,757 • 102 • 21	1,568 • 432 • 17	1,576 • 517 • 11	1,427 • 351 • 12	1,368 • 342 • 11	1,403 • 452 • 9

\*projected playoff team





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## 2 Cincinnati BENGALS

### STARTING LINEUP

#### OFFENSE

WR	Chad Johnson	5
LT	Levi Jones	4
LG	Eric Steinbach	4
C	Rich Braham	3
RG	Bobbie Williams	4
RT	Willie Anderson	5
TE	Reggie Kelly	2
WR	T.J. Houshmandzadeh	4
QB	Carson Palmer	5
FB	Jeremi Johnson	4
RB	Rudi Johnson	4

#### DEFENSE

LE	Bryan Robinson	3
DT	Sam Adams	4
DT	John Thornton	3
RE	Justin Smith	3
OLB	David Pollack	2
MLB	Brian Simmons	4
OLB	Landon Johnson	3
CB	Deltha O'Neal	4
CB	Tory James	3
SS	Dexter Jackson	4
FS	Madieu Williams	4

#### SPECIALISTS

K	Shayne Graham	5
P	Kyle Larson	3
KR	Tab Perry	4
PR	Antonio Chatman	3
LS	Brad St. Louis	3

Players rated 1-5,  
with 5 highest

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** Barring a setback, QB **Carson Palmer** will start the opener at Kansas City, just eight months after reconstructive surgery on his left knee. Palmer is the perfect strong-armed leader for an offense that returns 11 starters and can hurt opponents with a quick-strike passing game or a bruising running attack. Bookend OTs **Levi Jones** and **Willie Anderson** anchor a deep, talented line that will be under pressure to protect Palmer, whose health will be a seasonlong worry. The improving defense led the NFL with 44 takeaways last season and has plugged gaping holes with DT **Sam Adams** and SS **Dexter Jackson**. The team expects Adams and Jackson to help solidify the run defense, which would allow DEs **Bryan Robinson**, **Justin Smith** and **Robert Geathers** to generate more sacks in nickel packages. KR **Tab Perry** and PR **Antonio Chatman** are dangerous because of their speed and quickness. More speed has been added to the coverage units, so the special teams likely will be a strength.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** Backup QB **Anthony Wright** has more mobility than Palmer, but he lacks the arm strength to run the full playbook. Adams reported to camp out of shape because of a nagging ankle injury, and his lack of preseason snaps has caused chemistry and timing issues on the defensive line. OLB **David Pollack** is being counted on to have a breakout year, but a pulled hamstring has impeded his progress and questions remain about whether he and OLB **Landon Johnson** can contain the outside. MLB **Odell Thurman's** four-game suspension for violating the NFL's substance-abuse policy is a big setback. He was too aggressive at times as a rookie but also was the club's most explosive defender. **LUDWIG'S BOTTOM LINE:** With Palmer coming off major knee surgery and the team facing a challenging schedule, it's unrealistic to expect another AFC North crown. Still, the continuity on offense and upgrades on defense will allow the club to contend for a wild-card berth.

—Chick Ludwig



Palmer

ROBERT SEALE / SN



### SNAPSHOT with LE Bryan Robinson

**Player I most hate to play against:** Larry Allen. I wouldn't mind playing him early in the year. But later in the season, when he's in shape, he's one of those guys you hate to play against. He's just a big, strong, mean, evil man.

**Weirdest pregame ritual:** Deltha O'Neal gets about 50 towels out of the restroom, then lays them in front of his locker. He just kind of sits on them and lays on them and does the Deltha O'Neal thing. He wastes a lot of towels every week.

**Bet you didn't know this about Marvin Lewis:** He's a terrible basketball player. You remember Bill Cartwright's awkward-looking shot? He makes Bill Cartwright's shot look like Larry Bird's jumper.

**Beware of this guy in the locker room:** Chad Johnson. He'll do something real silly and get your juices going, man. He'll get you where you want to kill him, but you love the guy. And you know you need him, so you don't want to kill him.

**Cheapest teammate:** Without a doubt, Justin Smith. Justin is El Cheapo. He's always talking about making money and different things he's got going on, but Justin's not the type who will pick up a tab.

## 3 Baltimore RAVENS

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** The Ravens added QB **Steve McNair** during the offseason. Despite being prone to injury the past couple of years, he provides stability and much-needed confidence at the position. If McNair is

standing at the end of the season, the Ravens might get to the postseason. They finally have a quarterback who can make plays at crunch time. The team chemistry, which was bad the previous two seasons, has improved. Owner **Steve Bisciotti** ordered coach **Brian Billick** to stop being so arrogant and condescending and to establish relationships with the players. The Ravens signed FS **Ed Reed** and RB **Jamal Lewis** to new contracts. Money issues long have been a source of contention in the locker room. With these issues behind them, the Ravens will have more harmony.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** The offensive line performed poorly last season, but the front office brought back the entire group. LG **Edwin Mulitalo** and LT **Jonathan Ogden** worked out extensively in the offseason, which will help, but their performances have dropped off in recent years. Much improvement is

### STARTING LINEUP

#### OFFENSE

WR	Derrick Mason	4
LT	Jonathan Ogden	5
LG	Edwin Mulitalo	3
C	Mike Flynn	3
RG	Keydrick Vincent	2
RT	Tony Pashos	2
TE	Todd Heap	5
WR	Mark Clayton	3
QB	Steve McNair	3
FB	Justin Green	2
RB	Jamal Lewis	3

#### DEFENSE

LE	Trevor Pryce	2
DT	Haloti Ngata	2
DT	Kelly Gregg	3
RE	Terrell Suggs	4
OLB	Adalius Thomas	4
MLB	Ray Lewis	4
OLB	Bart Scott	3
CB	Chris McAllister	3
CB	Samari Rolle	3
SS	Dawan Landry	1
FS	Ed Reed	5

#### SPECIALISTS

K	Matt Stover	4
P	Leo Araguz	2
KR	B.J. Sams	3
PR	B.J. Sams	4
LS	Matt Katula	3

Players rated 1-5,  
with 5 highest

needed on the right side. If G **Keydrick Vincent** and T **Tony Pashos**, plus C **Mike Flynn**, can protect McNair, the offense will have success. The club lost free-agent DE **Anthony Weaver** and DT **Maake Kemoeatu**. They weren't spectacular players, but they were solid. Weaver was replaced by **Trevor Pryce**, who could be on the downside of his career. It will take time to groom DT **Haloti Ngata**, the club's first-round pick. He needs to keep linemen off MLB **Ray Lewis**.

**PRESTON'S BOTTOM LINE:** McNair has to stay healthy for the team to have a chance. The Ravens will be competitive only if they avoid injuries. The team may have waited too long to bring in a quarterback like McNair. It gambled on the development of QB **Kyle Boller**, and the window for a title closed significantly when he was a starter. —Mike Preston

### STAT PROJECTIONS RB Rushing yards • Receiving yards • Total TDs

FS	8. Clinton Portis	9. Steven Jackson	10. Cadillac Williams	11. Rudi Johnson	12. Willis McGahee	13. Brian Westbrook	14. Willie Parker
	1,487 • 244 • 12	1,446 • 302 • 10	1,411 • 226 • 11	1,354 • 142 • 11	1,345 • 217 • 9	873 • 628 • 9	1,217 • 233 • 7



## SNAPSHOT

with OLB **Adalius Thomas**

**Worst ride:** Kelly Gregg still has the Grand Prix he drove in high school. There's nothing wrong with it; it's just old.

**Cheapest teammate:** Jason Brown. If you invite him anywhere, the first thing he is going to ask you is if there is free food or free drinks. After him, it would be Jonathan Ogden.

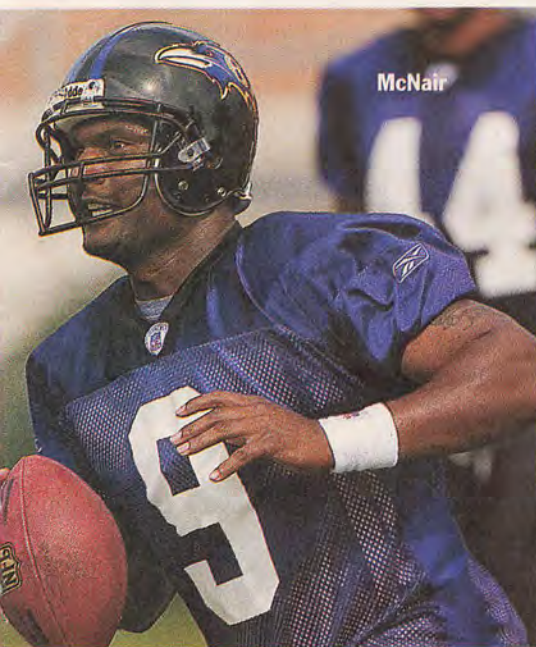
**My body on Monday morning:** It's like a steel rod. It takes me 4 or 5 minutes to get out of bed. You just kind of sit up, move things around to see what still works and what doesn't. Then it's, "Damn, where did that come from?"

**Beware of this guy in the locker room:** Me. Most times I'm returning it because if someone does something to me, I have to make it so bad that no one will want to mess

with me in the future. And if you knew about it, I'm going to get you, too.

**Can't-miss weekly dining tradition:** Blackened salmon, creamed spinach and fries.

**Funniest trash-talker:** We call Bart Scott "the Mad Backer." He gets to arguing and fighting with someone almost every single game and is always close to getting kicked out of games. Coach Billick is yelling and screaming everything at him, but it really doesn't matter.



McNair

BOB LEVERONE / SN

# 4 Cleveland BROWNS

## STARTING LINEUP OFFENSE

WR	Braylon Edwards	3
LT	Kevin Shaffer	4
LG	Joe Andruzzi	3
C	Ross Tucker	1
RG	Cosey Coleman	3
RT	Ryan Tucker	4
TE	Kellen Winslow	3
WR	Joe Jurevicius	3
QB	Charlie Frye	2
FB	Terrelle Smith	4
RB	Reuben Droughns	3

## DEFENSE

LE	Orpheus Roye	4
NT	Ted Washington	4
RE	Alvin McKinley	3
OLB	Willie McGinest	4
ILB	Andra Davis	4
ILB	D'Qwell Jackson	3
OLB	Kameron Wimbley	3
CB	Leigh Bodden	3
CB	Gary Baxter	3
SS	Sean Jones	3
FS	Brian Russell	3

## SPECIALISTS

K	Phil Dawson	4
P	Dave Zastudil	4
KR	Josh Cribbs	4
PR	Dennis Northcutt	4
LS	Ryan Pontbriand	4

Players rated 1-5, with 5 highest

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** The beleaguered Browns can hang their orange helmets on Romeo Crennel's leadership. He steadily has built confidence while tweaking the structure of the organization. Coordinator **Todd Grantham** figures to take the defense from respectable to good because the team signed NT **Ted Washington** and OLB **Willie McGinest** and drafted OLB **Kameron Wimbley** and ILB **D'Qwell Jackson**. All figure to start, and all are good fits in the 3-4. The receiving trio of WRs **Braylon Edwards** and **Joe Jurevicius** and TE **Kellen Winslow** could be impressive if Edwards and Winslow come back strong from knee surgeries. Jurevicius is a big target who figures to solve some of the team's red zone problems.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** **Maurice Carthon** didn't inspire much confidence in his first year as offensive coordinator. He needs to be more creative to keep teams from focusing on



Edwards

JAY BROWNS / SN

RB **Reuben Droughns**. QB **Charlie Frye** is resourceful but needs to be more accurate. There will be pressure on Frye to do more than just manage the game. If he fails, the team won't hesitate to look for a new No. 1 QB. Center was supposed to be a strength, but **LeCharles Bentley** was lost for the season. The Browns will try to get by at the position with journeymen **Ross Tucker** and **Lennie Friedman**. The pass rush needs to improve because there are serious issues in the secondary. No. 1 CB **Gary Baxter** (strained pectoral) and nickel back **Daylon McCutcheon** (knee) missed most of the preseason. The front seven looks strong, but that could change quickly if Washington and McGinest wear down.

**DOERSCHUK'S BOTTOM LINE:** If Crennel somehow improves the team from 6-10 to 7-9, he will prove he is a capable coach. The defense will keep the team in games and could carry it to a respectable record with healthy years from Washington and McGinest. But the offense might have too many issues to avoid more dog days for the Dawg Pound. —Steve Doerschuk

## SNAPSHOT

with CB **Gary Baxter**

**Beware of this guy in the locker room:** Probably big Ted Washington. He does some weird stuff. It's not just pranks. He'll relate everything to a movie; he knows 'em all. He'll come up with a quote from a movie for every situation.



**Weirdest pregame ritual:** I don't know about anybody else, but I have to start out with Lay's potato chips. It started in middle school. I ate the chips, and we won. I thought, "Maybe it's the chips." I kept bringing chips to the games—had to be Lay's. We kept winning. I never stopped.

**Cheapest teammate:** Sean Jones, definitely. I mean, he forgets that he's a second-round pick. He swears he's dead broke.

**Bet you didn't know this about Romeo Crennel:** He looks cool and calm on the sideline, but you don't want to push his buttons because he can turn very vicious. He can be a different person.

**Road trip I like most:** The thought of going down to Miami, just being out

there, knowing you're in good sunny weather no matter what time of year it is ... that's nice.

**My body on Monday morning:** It's like I stood in front of a train and let it run me over. My feet are the worst. You do so much planting and cutting and driving.

15. Chester Taylor  
1,061 • 406 • 5

16. Julius Jones  
1,176 • 255 • 6

17. Reuben Droughns  
1,164 • 295 • 5

18. Kevin Jones  
1,083 • 277 • 6

19. Reggie Bush  
783 • 558 • 7

20. Warrick Dunn  
1,094 • 240 • 6

21. Thomas Jones  
920 • 161 • 6



# S O U T H

Predicted finish: 1 Colts 13-3\* 2 Jaguars 9-7 3 Titans 5-11 4 Texans 4-12

## 1 Indianapolis COLTS

### SCOUTS VIEWS



BOB LEVERONE / SN

**Wayne doesn't have the big name some of his teammates do, but he makes big plays.**

**COLTS** Everyone knows **Peyton Manning** has a great arm and great command of the offense, but the work he puts in between Monday and Saturday is the key to his success. ... **Reggie Wayne** has kind of been their unsung hero the last few years. He hasn't been the game breaker everyone sees in **Marvin Harrison**, but he makes big plays and he's a guy you need to account for. ... Having a guy like **Adam Vinatieri**, who has kicked under pressure and won under pressure, is a big plus. That one element could be the difference in them going to the Super Bowl. **JAGUARS** **Marcus Stroud** and **John Henderson** are disruptive in the middle of their defensive line. They push the pocket and make runners go east and west instead of north and south. ... They could start their own basketball team with their wide receivers. Obviously, losing **Jimmy Smith** was a blow, but they have big targets, guys who are bigger than most defensive backs. ... I don't know if you can say this is a critical year, but they're at the point where they feel they need to step up to that next level to be the type of playoff team they hope to be. **TITANS** I really like **Kyle Vanden Bosch**. A lot of guys can harass the passer and force other guys to make sacks. I want the guy who's a sacker—and that's what he does. ... The stage is set for **Vince Young** to step in at some point. I think they're in a rebuilding stage, and they might as well start rebuilding with the guy they drafted. ... Their corners are just adequate, including **Pacman Jones**. **TEXANS** They wanted to make sure they got a potential Pro Bowl-type player for the defense, and **Mario Williams** fits the bill. Was he a popular choice over **Reggie Bush**? No, but he was probably the right choice. ... In **Dunta Robinson**, they have a corner they can put on the other team's best receiver. If you don't have that type of guy, it's really scary.

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** As long as QB **Peyton Manning** is under center, the Colts will be legitimate Super Bowl contenders. Management won't allow the offensive talent around him to drop off. The team didn't re-sign RB **Edgerrin James** because it believed James will be an elite player for only another year or two and was unwilling to give him the four-year deal he was seeking. The running game will at least be respectable with **Dominic Rhodes** and/or first-round pick **Joseph Addai** carrying the load. The passing game will be as productive as ever. WR **Marvin Harrison** shows no signs of slowing down, and WR **Reggie Wayne** continues to get better. If it is relatively healthy, a young defense led by Es **Dwight Freeney** and **Robert Mathis** will only improve. Those two spearhead one of the league's most aggressive and disruptive lines. Management replaced **Mike Vanderjagt**, the most accurate kicker in NFL history, with Patriots star **Adam Vinatieri**. Vanderjagt had two critical misses in the postseason, including his errant attempt against the Steelers. Vinatieri simply doesn't miss money kicks.

### STARTING LINEUP OFFENSE

WR	Reggie Wayne	4
LT	Tarik Glenn	5
LG	Ryan Lilja	3
C	Jeff Saturday	4
RG	Jake Scott	3
RT	Ryan Diem	3
TE	Dallas Clark	3
WR	Marvin Harrison	5
WR	Brandon Stokley	2
QB	Peyton Manning	5
RB	Dominic Rhodes	3

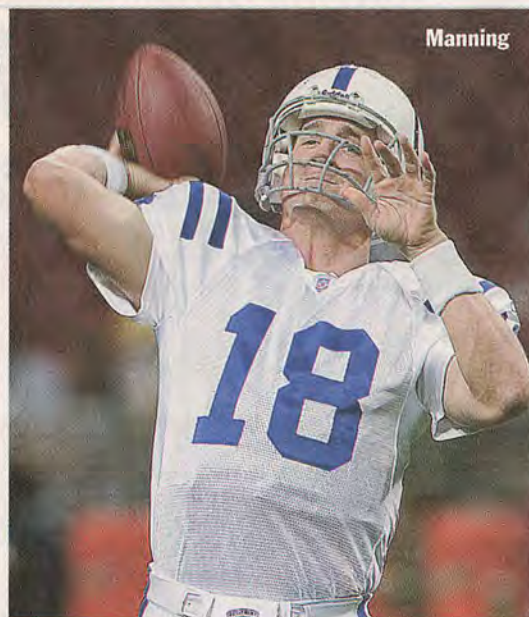
### DEFENSE

LE	Robert Mathis	4
DT	Montae Reagor	3
DT	Raheem Brock	3
RE	Dwight Freeney	5
OLB	Gilbert Gardner	2
MLB	Gary Brackett	3
OLB	Cato June	4
CB	Nick Harper	3
CB	Jason David	3
SS	Bob Sanders	4
FS	Mike Doss	3

### SPECIALISTS

K	Adam Vinatieri	5
P	Hunter Smith	4
KR	T.J. Rushing	2
PR	T.J. Rushing	2
LS	Justin Snow	4

Players rated 1-5, with 5 highest



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

Manning

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** Injuries to SS **Bob Sanders** (shoulder), FS **Mike Doss** (calf), CB **Jason David** (groin) and Ts **Corey Simon** (knee) and **Montae Reagor** (knee) have prevented the defense from becoming cohesive this summer. Most of those five are expected to be ready for the opener. Simon is coming off arthroscopic surgery; if he's limited early, second-year players **Darrell Reid** and **Sweet Pea Burns** will need to contribute. Doss is solid in run support but can be a liability in coverage. If he falters, rookie **Antoine Bethea** could challenge him for a starting spot. Bethea is raw but has good ability and instincts. Until Rhodes and Addai prove themselves, defenses will focus on stopping the pass. Manning will need to be as patient and disciplined as he was during the team's 13-0 start last season.

**CHAPPELL'S BOTTOM LINE:** Look for the Colts to win their fourth straight division championship and join the 1992-95 Cowboys as the only teams to win at least 12 games in four consecutive seasons. But the season ultimately will be measured by postseason success, and anything short of a trip to the AFC title game would be a disappointment. The window of opportunity isn't necessarily closing on the Colts, but it won't stay open forever. —Mike Chappell

### U SNAPSHOT with OLB Cato June

**Funniest trash-talker:** I talk a lot of trash, but it's probably Bob Sanders. He gives people the most problems. For some reason, he gets under everybody's skin and everybody wants to fight him come the second quarter. **Worst ride:** Mike Doss has got an "old school," one of those things you try to fix up. He's got a laptop computer in the front. It just looks terrible. It's right there—steering wheel, laptop, glove compartment. It's like a Monte Carlo or something. **Best thing about our training room:** The training staff. They keep it light in there. Anything goes. We call it the barbershop. **Rookie dues:** They take us out to a big dinner. DBs, they really do them dirty. Big, expensive dinners. Same with the linemen. They make them get limos, things like that. **Beware of this guy in the locker room:** We don't have a big prankster in the locker room; we have a big kid. Big Corey (Simon) is a big kid. He's always sneaking up behind you, pulling your chair out, trying to hit you. **Cheapest teammate:** Oh, Raheem Brock. Dwight "Free"-ney is a close second. Man, you talk about walking out on tabs and all that. That's a Freeney move.



BARBER SHOP

### STAT PROJECTIONS RB Rushing yards • Receiving yards • Total TDs

<b>FS</b> 22. Domanick Davis	23. Corey Dillon	24. Jamal Lewis	25. Joseph Addai	26. Frank Gore	27. Mike Bell	28. DeShaun Foster
954 • 304 • 8	994 • 174 • 9	1,051 • 151 • 6	987 • 284 • 6	795 • 121 • 5	950 • 193 • 5	1,045 • 261 • 5





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## 2 Jacksonville JAGUARS

### STARTING LINEUP

#### OFFENSE

WR	Matt Jones	3
LT	Khalif Barnes	4
LG	Vince Manuwai	3
C	Brad Meester	3
RG	Chris Naeole	4
RT	Maurice Williams	2
TE	Kyle Brady	2
WR	Ernest Wilford	3
QB	Byron Leftwich	3
FB	Greg Jones	3
RB	Fred Taylor	3

#### DEFENSE

LE	Reggie Hayward	4
DT	Marcus Stroud	4
DT	John Henderson	5
RE	Paul Spicer	3
OLB	Nick Greisen	2
MLB	Mike Peterson	4
OLB	Daryl Smith	3
CB	Rashean Mathis	4
CB	Brian Williams	3
SS	Donovin Darius	4
FS	Deon Grant	3

#### SPECIALISTS

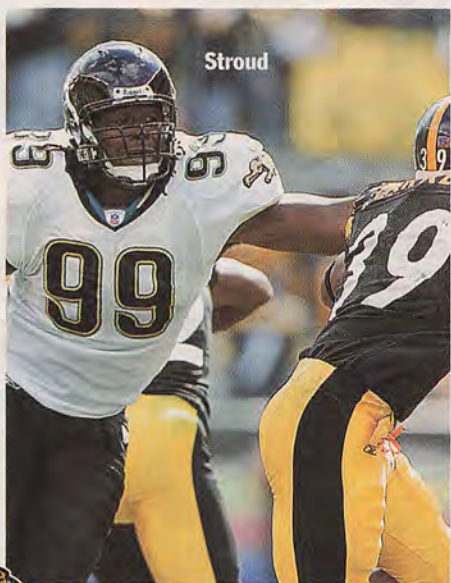
K	Josh Scobee	3
P	Chris Hanson	4
KR	Maurice Jones-Drew	2
PR	Alvin Pearman	2
LS	Joe Zelenka	4

Players rated 1-5,  
with 5 highest

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** The defense is a tough, disciplined unit built around DTs **Marcus Stroud** and **John Henderson** and MLB **Mike Peterson**, though the unit would be dealt a blow if the knee injury Peterson suffered last week becomes a lingering problem. Assuming hard-hitting SS **Donovin Darius** makes a strong comeback from knee surgery, the secondary also will be an asset. CBs **Rashean Mathis** and **Brian Williams** have good size and playmaking skills. The special teams will be solid if K **Josh Scobee** overcomes a preseason leg injury. P **Chris Hanson** consistently has posted some of the league's best net-yardage numbers, and the return game looks dangerous with the arrival of RB **Maurice Jones-Drew**. On offense, the club hopes **Byron Leftwich** will emerge as an elite quarterback after showing flashes of promise the past three years. The team also has shown that it can win on the road.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** WR **Jimmy Smith's** retirement in May left a void in the offense. Second-year pro **Matt Jones** was hurt much of the preseason and doesn't look ready for the No. 1 role; **Ernest Wilford** and **Reggie Williams** were inconsistent and inspired little

confidence that they can be the game-breaking receivers the team needs. The offensive line also has sputtered, opening few holes for the running game and allowing defenses to pressure the quarterbacks. The sluggish running game has left some to wonder whether the club will jettison the frequently injured **Fred Taylor** in favor of the bruising **Greg Jones** and the explosive **Jones-Drew**, though that plan could be affected by Jones' recent knee injury, which bears watching. **HUBBUC'S BOTTOM LINE:** A stout defense will keep the Jaguars in most games, but the schedule is too difficult and there are too many concerns on offense for them to come close to last season's 12-4 mark. —Bart Hubbuch



BOB LEVERONE / SN

### SNAPSHOT with CB Rashean Mathis

**Unique vanity plate:** "BIG HEN" on John Henderson's car. Not too many people are going to ride around with that. People might think you're talking about a real hen or something.

**Cheapest teammate:** Rob Meier, hands down. He won't spend a dime. He's very conservative—let's put it that way. Maybe it's because he's Canadian.

**Road trip I like most:** Phoenix. Great scenery, good restaurants and a lot to do. I'm from Florida, so it was neat to see the mountains they have out there.

**Huddle moment:** When we're at home, the defense is on the field and the songs start playing. The guys start dancing, and it gets everybody into it.

**Weirdest pregame ritual:** Donovin Darius always makes me laugh with the way he lines his helmet, jersey and pants up in front of his locker before he puts it on. As if that's going to make a difference.

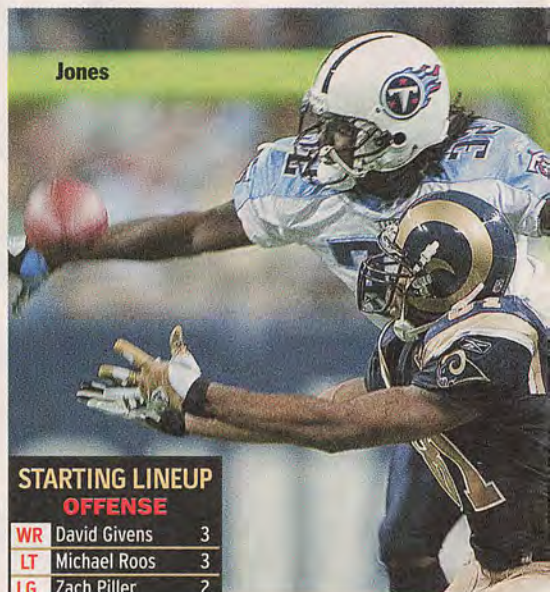
**Worst ride:** Ernest Wilford still has his old Camry, and the guys get on him about that. There's nothing wrong with it, but it's a Camry. That's all you have to say.

**Player I most hate to play against:** Marvin Harrison. He's a great athlete, and you have to respect his abilities. Plus, he doesn't talk. He just does his job, lines up and does it again.

### STAT PROJECTIONS RB Rushing yards • Receiving yards • Total TDs

<b>FS</b> 29. Deuce McAllister	30. Fred Taylor	31. Chris Brown	32. Cedric Benson	33. Ahman Green	34. Dominic Rhodes	35. Tatum Bell
923 • 186 • 8	901 • 171 • 6	844 • 246 • 4	877 • 62 • 4	862 • 220 • 6	660 • 182 • 6	977 • 135 • 4

## 3 Tennessee TITANS



Jones

### STARTING LINEUP

#### OFFENSE

WR	David Givens	3
LT	Michael Roos	3
LG	Zach Piller	2
C	Kevin Mawae	3
RG	Benji Olson	3
RT	Jacob Bell	3
TE	Erron Kinney	3
WR	Drew Bennett	3
QB	Billy Volek	2
FB	Troy Fleming	2
RB	Chris Brown	3

#### DEFENSE

LE	Kyle Vanden Bosch	5
DT	Albert Haynesworth	4
DT	Randy Starks	2
RE	Travis LaBoy	2
OLB	David Thornton	4
MLB	Peter Sirmon	3
OLB	Keith Bulluck	5
CB	Reynaldo Hill	3
CB	Pacman Jones	3
SS	Lamont Thompson	3
FS	Chris Hope	4

#### SPECIALISTS

K	Rob Bironas	3
P	Craig Hentrich	4
KR	Bobby Wade	3
PR	Pacman Jones	4
LS	Ken Amato	3

Players rated 1-5,  
with 5 highest

### REASONS FOR

**OPTIMISM:** The Titans signed four veterans to provide leadership for a team that was the NFL's youngest in 2005. C **Kevin Mawae**, WR **David Givens**, FS **Chris Hope** and OLB **David Thornton** will make a difference on the field and in the locker room. If the team struggles early, it won't crumble as it did last season. RBs **Chris Brown**, **Travis Henry** and rookie **LenDale White** all are solid options as the team attempts to establish the running game. Brown is injury-prone, but he hopes 10 extra pounds will help him hold up better. Henry is 10 pounds lighter and clearly faster because of it. White brings quick feet and toughness to the mix. Second-year CB **Pacman Jones** has improved his technique considerably. He's a big threat in the return game, where he'll

handle punts and perhaps kickoffs.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** Career backup **Billy Volek** has plenty to prove as he takes over for QB **Steve McNair**. Volek



has a strong arm but tends to hold the ball too long. **Vince Young** is the future, but he's raw and not ready to contribute. The addition of Mawae helps, but the offensive line is dealing with plenty of change—including the loss of free-agent C **Justin Hartwig** to the Panthers. T **Michael Roos** has moved to the left side, with T **Jacob Bell** taking over on the right side. Gs **Zach**

**Piller** and **Benji Olson** don't move as well as they once did. There is little depth in the secondary, and S **Vincent Fuller** is an unproven nickel back. Some of these backups are going to have to play.

**WYATT'S BOTTOM LINE:** The Titans made upgrades, but they are not ready for a postseason run. The offense lacks playmakers, the defense has little depth, and injuries in the preseason have left the team even thinner. Young and White are important building blocks, and salary cap problems now are a thing of the past. Look for the team to be more competitive, but with a tough schedule the record might not improve. —Jim Wyatt



MICHAEL McNAMARA / SN

## SNAPSHOT

with MLB **Peter Sirmon**

**Funniest trash-talker:** Pacman Jones. I'm not sure there is a filter from the brain to the mouth, so that's what makes his trash-talking so entertaining. He lets everything fly.

**Bet you didn't know this about Jeff Fisher:** He loves to go fly-fishing in Montana.

**Most wired:** Kyle Vanden Bosch doesn't give high-fives; he gives head slaps. I have to put the mouthpiece in before we start our drills because I know he is going to slap my head. I haven't told him to stop it, though.

**Most memorable slobberknocker:** Against the Eagles in my third year, Donovan McNabb

pump-faked, I jumped up and Duce Staley caught me in the air and slammed me into the ground. I thought my chest was going through my spine.

**Player I most hate to play against:** Edgerrin James. He is just so strong. Sometimes you try

and tackle him and you feel like you are a calf wrestler in the rodeo.

**Road trip I like most:** Houston. We usually have pretty good steaks, and the stadium is nice, too. You don't have to dress in high school locker rooms.

**Rookie dues:** A \$13,000 dinner tab. That's what Pacman's was, and it's going to be better this year with Vince (Young). It could be in the 20s. We all saw what he got for guaranteed money.



# 4 Houston TEXANS

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** The players quickly bought into the philosophy of new coach **Gary Kubiak**, who had a track record of success as offensive coordinator in Denver for 10 years and injected a much-needed fresh attitude into a locker room that had been drained of confidence. The offensive line has been overhauled, and QB **David Carr** has newfound trust in the players protecting him. With former Packers coach **Mike Sherman** supervising the line and the Broncos' successful zone-blocking scheme as the base, the Texans no

longer will have the worst pass protection in the league. The defensive players have embraced the switch from a 3-4 to a 4-3. The line is by far the Texans' strongest and deepest unit, and Es **Mario Williams** and **Anthony Weaver** will give the team an aggressive outside pass rush.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** There will be a transition period—and some bumps along the way—as the players adjust to a new coaching staff and new offensive and defensive schemes.

There are no guarantees when it comes to RB **Domanick Davis'** health, so the team will count on one of its youngsters—likely rookie **Wali Lundy** or **Vernand Morency**—to step up at some point and share the load with RB **Antowain Smith**. Depth is a concern at most positions, and injuries already have hit the secondary, linebackers and running backs. The Texans

could start as many as seven first- or second-year players, so much will depend on how fast they emerge. That includes Williams, who will have to attract double-teams to free up other defenders. **Seth Wand**, 27, beat promising rookie **Charles Spencer** for the starting left tackle job because Wand is more reliable, but blind-side protection still could be an issue.

**MANFULL'S BOTTOM LINE:** Expect the Texans to show significant progress and improve upon last season's 2-14 record. But given all the changes, a turnaround won't happen overnight. —Megan Manfull



MATTHEW KUTZ / SN

## SNAPSHOT

with TE **Mark Bruener**

**Weirdest pregame ritual:** Steve McKinney spends an unbelievable amount of time in the bathroom before games. He likes to eat his pregame meal in the bathroom.

**Huddle moment:** We were in a "4-minute offense" a couple years ago, and we were trying to run time off the clock to win the game. David (Carr) called a play that I had never heard before. He was just joking. I said, "Wait a minute, we don't have that play!" Everyone laughed. Basically, it was just a prank on me.

**Rookie dues:** Coach Kubiak is real good at providing entertainment for us. He has rookies get up and sing before big team meetings.

**My body on Monday morning:** You feel kind of like you got dragged behind a car for a couple of miles and then the car backed up and ran over you. Getting out of bed can take a very long time.

**Bet you didn't know this about Gary Kubiak:** One of the unique things about coach Kubiak is he knows where everybody went to school and their stats. He'll be in the middle of practice, and you'll do something. He'll say, "You rushed for 1,100 yards your senior year in high school—why can't you perform better now?" He'll actually name the high school. It's crazy.

## STARTING LINEUP OFFENSE

WR	Andre Johnson	4
LT	Seth Wand	2
LG	Chester Pitts	3
C	Mike Flanagan	4
RG	Steve McKinney	3
RT	Zach Wiegert	3
TE	Mark Bruener	3
WR	Eric Moulds	3
QB	David Carr	3
FB	Jameel Cook	2
RB	Domanick Davis	3

## DEFENSE

LE	Anthony Weaver	3
DT	Travis Johnson	2
DT	Robaire Smith	3
RE	Mario Williams	3
OLB	Shantee Orr	3
MLB	DeMeco Ryans	3
OLB	Morlon Greenwood	3
CB	Dunta Robinson	4
CB	Lewis Sanders	2
SS	Glenn Earl	3
FS	C.C. Brown	3

## SPECIALISTS

K	Kris Brown	3
P	Chad Stanley	4
KR	Phillip Buchanon	2
PR	Phillip Buchanon	3
LS	Bryan Pittman	5

Players rated 1-5,  
with 5 highest

36. DeAngelo Williams  
712 • 210 • 4

37. Laurence Maroney  
681 • 192 • 4

38. Kevan Barlow  
746 • 237 • 4

39. LenDale White  
526 • 182 • 5

40. Samkon Gado  
575 • 65 • 5

41. Greg Jones  
657 • 71 • 4

42. Marion Barber  
584 • 184 • 3



**AFC WEST****SCOUTS VIEWS**

**BRONCOS** Their linebacker trio of **Al Wilson**, **Ian Gold** and **D.J. Williams** is as good as any in the league. They're all physical guys who can run, cover and blitz. ... They've got three pretty good corners in **Champ Bailey**, **Darrent Williams** and **Dominique Foxworth**. Williams is a better cover guy than Foxworth, who's a pretty good nickel back right now. ... **Javon Walker** has got size and is a good pass catcher. He's an upgrade over **Ashley Lelie**.

**CHIEFS** With **Willie Roaf** gone, it's going to hamper **Larry Johnson** some. He's still going to get his yards and touchdowns, and he's going to be the focal point of the offense, but I don't think he's going to be as dominant as he was last year until that line comes around. ... Every year you hear that their defense has improved. Well, I'm not buying into all the hype until I see it on the field. ... **Dante Hall** is still a game-breaking returner. You've got to respect him every time he touches the ball. **CHARGERS** **Philip Rivers** is very accurate and has a strong enough

arm, but he's never started an NFL game. We're all kind of in the dark until we see him go out and perform when the bullets fly. ... Their best playmaker on defense is **Shawne Merriman**. You've got to know where he is on the field. Is he coming on a blitz? Is he dropping into coverage? You've got to account for him. ... I don't know if **Antonio Gates** has surpassed **Tony Gonzalez**, but he's right there with him. When you talk about the best tight ends in the league, you talk

**Gates deserves a Tony for his dominant play.**

about those guys. **RAIDERS** **Aaron Brooks** is a journeyman quarterback who has some talent but hasn't been able to put it all together. They're not going to challenge for the division or playoffs with him as the quarterback. ... I think **Robert Gallery** will be a good offensive tackle, but I haven't seen the signs yet of him being the great, can't-miss prospect everybody said he was going to be.

Predicted finish: **1** Broncos 11-5\* **2** Chiefs 10-6\* **3** Chargers 9-7 **4** Raiders 3-13

**STARTING LINEUP****OFFENSE**

WR	Rod Smith	4
LT	Matt Lepsis	4
LG	Ben Hamilton	3
C	Tom Nalen	4
RG	Cooper Carlisle	3
RT	George Foster	3
TE	Stephen Alexander	3
WR	Javon Walker	4
QB	Jake Plummer	3
FB	Cecil Sapp	3
RB	Mike Bell	2

**DEFENSE**

LE	Courtney Brown	3
DT	Michael Myers	3
DT	Gerard Warren	4
RE	Ebenezer Ekuban	3
OLB	D.J. Williams	4
MLB	Al Wilson	5
OLB	Ian Gold	3
CB	Champ Bailey	5
CB	Darrent Williams	3
SS	Nick Ferguson	3
FS	John Lynch	3

**SPECIALISTS**

K	Jason Elam	4
P	Todd Sauerbrun	4
KR	David Kircus	3
PR	Darrent Williams	3
LS	Mike Leach	4

Players rated 1-5, with 5 highest

**1 Denver BRONCOS**

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** Even without WR **Ashley Lelie**'s ability to stretch the field, the Broncos figure to have a more explosive passing game because of the additions of WR **Javon Walker** and rookie TE **Tony Scheffler**. Coach **Mike Shanahan**'s strength is taking advantage of matchups, and with WR **Rod Smith** often drawing double-teams, Scheffler and Walker are athletic enough to beat man coverage and benefit from yards-after-catch opportunities. QB **Jake**

**Plummer** seemingly has discovered his comfort zone within the offense and has eliminated many of the errors that plagued him earlier in his career. Premier CB **Champ Bailey** is healthy after being banged up for much of last season, and second-year DBs **Darrent Williams** and **Dominique Foxworth** have increased confidence and knowledge of NFL receivers. The linebacking group of **Al Wilson**, **Ian Gold** and **D.J. Williams** remains at the top of the league in terms of speed, instincts and playmaking ability.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** The suspension of P **Todd Sauerbrun**, who also is the kickoff specialist, for the first four games removes a major weapon in terms of swinging field position. It also puts **Paul Ernster**, essentially a second-year rookie, in a pressure-packed role during a difficult opening stretch. The Broncos

have some pass-rushing depth with the additions of Es **Kenard Lang** and **Elvis Dumervil** and are committed to getting to the quarterback by conventional means. But they have to find the right mix off the bat or they'll have to resort to more blitzes, as they did last season. Undrafted rookie RB **Mike Bell** has to prove he can be sure-handed, something that was a question mark for him in the preseason and in college.

**RASIZER'S BOTTOM LINE:** The Broncos will battle for the AFC West title and are legitimate threats to make it to the Super Bowl. After going 13-3 last season, they could have a season much like 1997—when they lost more games in the regular season but were more battle-tested when the playoffs started. —Lee Rasizer

Plummer

**SNAPSHOT**

with TE **Stephen Alexander**

**NFL initiation:** My first day of training camp (with the Redskins), they made me get up on a school desk and sing a song. The whole organization—all the scouts, personnel people, trainers—was there. It was like, "Here I am." I sang, "All My Ex's Live In Texas." I don't even know all the words. I got booed within seconds.

**Beware of this guy in the locker room:** Keith Burns, for sure. He'll pick somebody and just go on and on and on. He's so quick-witted. Everybody loves listening to him, and we feed off of that.

**Nobody knows this about Invesco Field:** There's a bathroom in a tunnel on the 50-yard line, which I have used on more than one occasion.

**Player I most hate to play against:** Somebody like Rodney Harrison, who always has his hands in your face and is running his mouth. He'll hit you in the back when you're not looking. He's a good guy. I played with him (in San Diego); I like him. But he's just not fun to play against.

**Bet you didn't know this about Mike Shanahan:** We do a golf outing every year, and it's unbelievable how competitive he is. It doesn't matter what he does, he wants to win. Everything is serious, whether it's golf, checkers or coaching a football team.



BILL ROSS / AP

**STAT PROJECTIONS RB** Rushing yards • Receiving yards • Total TDs

<b>FS</b> 43. T.J. Duckett	44. Brandon Jacobs	45. Cedric Houston	46. Ryan Moats	47. Mike Anderson	48. Travis Henry	49. Jerious Norwood
428 • 60 • 7	276 • 0 • 6	582 • 163 • 2	551 • 86 • 0	591 • 182 • 3	437 • 141 • 2	438 • 38 • 5





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## 2 Kansas City CHIEFS

### STARTING LINEUP OFFENSE

WR	Samie Parker	2
LT	Kyle Turley	3
LG	Brian Waters	5
C	Casey Wiegmann	4
RG	Will Shields	5
RT	Kevin Sampson	2
TE	Tony Gonzalez	5
WR	Eddie Kennison	3
QB	Trent Green	4
FB	Ronnie Cruz	2
RB	Larry Johnson	5

### DEFENSE

LE	Tamba Hali	3
DT	James Reed	2
DT	Ron Edwards	2
RE	Jared Allen	4
OLB	Derrick Johnson	4
MLB	Kawika Mitchell	3
OLB	Kendrell Bell	3
CB	Patrick Surtain	4
CB	Ty Law	4
SS	Sammy Knight	3
FS	Greg Wesley	3

### SPECIALISTS

K	Lawrence Tynes	4
P	Dustin Colquitt	4
KR	Dante Hall	4
PR	Dante Hall	4
LS	Kendall Gammon	4

Players rated 1-5, with 5 highest

### REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:

**Coach Herm Edwards** and **RB Larry Johnson** were made for each other. Edwards wants to get a lead, then pound away on the opponent with a big, physical back. Few runners are more intimidating than Johnson. If the Chiefs can get out in front, they will be difficult to catch.

**QB Trent Green** provides leadership and a calming presence in a time of transition for the offense. Green excels at managing the offense and executing play-action passes. **MLB Kawika Mitchell** and **OLB Derrick Johnson** are good fits in the new cover 2 scheme. Both are every-down players who can make plays from sideline to sideline and down the field.

**K Lawrence Tynes** and **P Dustin Colquitt** appear primed to give the Chiefs one of the best kicking combinations in the league. Tynes has great range and the necessary accuracy on field-goal attempts, but he must improve his kickoffs. The left-footed Colquitt's towering punts are easy to cover and difficult for returners to handle.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** The transition to Edwards' style of offense won't be easy. Other than Johnson, the components are better for a big-play, high-scoring offense. **WRs Samie Parker** and **Eddie Kennison** are fast, Green believes in taking chances downfield, and the line is more agile and athletic than big and powerful. After losing OTs **Willie Roaf** and **John Welbourn**, the line is far from stable. **LT Kyle Turley** is attempting a comeback after missing two seasons with back troubles, and **RT Kevin Sampson** has one career start. Other than **E Jared Allen**, the team doesn't have a pass rusher it can depend on. The lack of inside pressure is a concern. The Chiefs may have to blitz more than they'd like.

**TEICHER'S BOTTOM LINE:** The Chiefs are talented enough to win the AFC West or make the playoffs as a wild-card team, but many things need to fall into place. It's hard to picture them topping their 10-win total from 2005. —Adam Teicher



Green

ALBERT DICKSON / SN

## 3 San Diego CHARGE

### REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:

**TE Antonio Gates** and **RB LaDainian Tomlinson** are two of the best in the game and will be life jackets for **QB Philip Rivers**, who otherwise might sink as a first-year starter. Though Rivers might not end up in the Pro Bowl this season, he won't hold back the offense much. He has the talent to be a star someday, and he improved rapidly in the offseason and in training camp. Rivers sees the field well, gets rid of the ball quickly and steps up against pressure. On defense, the front seven couldn't be much better. The Chargers ranked No. 1 in rushing yards allowed last season, and **OLBs Steve Foley** and **Shawne Merriman** and **Es Luis Castillo** and **Igor Olshansky** will produce plenty of sacks. Much hinges on the health of **NT Jamal Williams**, the focal point of the 3-4 defense. He excels at causing havoc in the backfield and setting up teammates so they can make plays.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** Rivers has been extremely impressive, but uncertainty still surrounds him. The secondary seems ready to make a big improvement every fall, but skepticism remains because **CBs Quentin Jammer** and **Drayton Florence** allow too many big plays and don't make enough of them. The hope is **FS Marlon McCree** and rookie **CB Antonio Cromartie** will upgrade the playmaking ability of a secondary that intercepted just



Tomlinson

ROBERT SEALE / SN

### KS SNAPSHOT

with **DT Lionel Dalton**

**Worst ride:** Benny Sapp's turquoise Chevy. That's an ugly car. You've got to live in Florida to appreciate that car.

**Funniest trash-talker:** Probably Ray Lewis. He reads backgrounds on players and their families. It's not funny, but it's personal and he gets the best of the guy.

**Road trip I like most:** Denver. I had a lot of bad experiences when I played for Denver. I like to see the little man (Mike Shanahan) turn red on the side of the field.

**Cheapest teammate:** They say I don't like to pay for dinner, that I always forget my wallet. And it's true: I do forget my wallet a lot.

**Unique locker:** Eddie Kennison's. He has a lot of pictures and rocks and trinkets and all sorts of weird stuff.

**Most memorable slobberknocker:** My rookie year with the Ravens, we played Detroit and it was Barry Sanders' last game. I hit him and he fumbled the ball and (Tony) Siragusa jumped on it. It was my first big tackle in an NFL game. I'm from Detroit, and Barry Sanders was an idol of mine. I have a picture of that.

**Most wired:** My position coach, Tim Krumrie. He never gets tired. He screams until his voice goes out. I think he drinks too many sodas or something before practice because it's like he's on caffeine.

### STAT PROJECTIONS WR Receiving yards • Receiving TDs

<b>FS</b>	1. Chad Johnson 1,396 • 11	2. Steve Smith 1,423 • 11	3. Torrey Holt 1,378 • 10	4. Larry Fitzgerald 1,266 • 9	5. Terrell Owens 1,140 • 12	6. Marvin Harrison 1,104 • 12	7. Randy Moss 1,194 • 10
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# RS

## SNAPSHOT

with RT **Shane Olivea**

**Most wired:** Nick Hardwick. He's crazy before a game. Last year, we're in Washington getting dressed and Nick is in his jock. That's all he's wearing, and he goes and stands right in front of Drew (Brees) and starts shaking his ass and says, "This is what you're going to be touching all day."

**Weirdest pregame ritual:** If we lose, I won't drive to the stadium the same route. I have three or four different ways to go. If we win, I'll go the same way until we lose.

**Beware of this guy in the locker room:** We don't have pranksters, but Steve Foley is the funniest. He's a clown. And he has a real good

relationship with Marty (Schottenheimer). So he can rip Marty and get away with it—stuff we all want to say but we can't.

**Rookie dues:** Buying things. It's worse the higher you're taken. They made Marcus (McNeill, second-rounder) buy a stereo. Me, a seventh-rounder, I just had to buy breakfast burritos.

**Unique locker:** Clinton Hart's. He's got all these dolls in there. What's up with that?

**Nobody knows this about Qualcomm Stadium:** The things players do on the sideline. We are so far from the stands, way farther than most stadiums. I pee on the sideline three or four times a game.

seven passes last season. Rookie LT **Marcus McNeill** is picking up things quickly, but that doesn't mean he's ready to protect Rivers' blind side,

which he likely will do for at least six games while **Roman Oben** (foot) is out. McNeill is a physical specimen and is learning to use his long arms more aggressively, but he likely will get burned a few times.

**ACEE'S BOTTOM LINE:** If Rivers limits his mistakes, the line protects him and opens holes for Tomlinson and the secondary tightens up, the Chargers will be a playoff team. That might be too much to ask. —Kevin Acee

### STARTING LINEUP

#### OFFENSE

WR	Eric Parker	3
LT	Marcus McNeill	2
LG	Kris Dielman	4
C	Nick Hardwick	4
RG	Mike Goff	3
RT	Shane Olivea	3
TE	Antonio Gates	5
WR	Keenan McCardell	4
QB	Philip Rivers	3
FB	Lorenzo Neal	5
RB	LaDainian Tomlinson	5

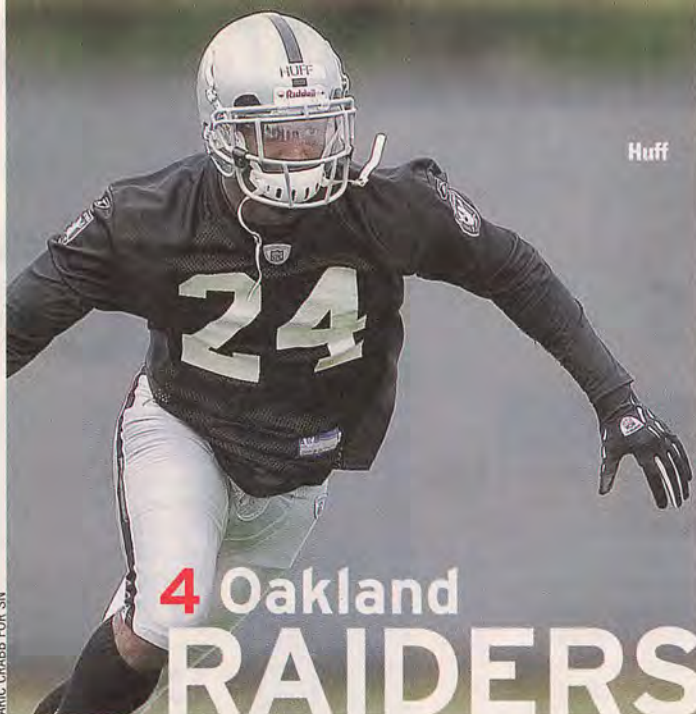
#### DEFENSE

LE	Luis Castillo	4
NT	Jamal Williams	5
RE	Igor Olshansky	4
OLB	Shawne Merriman	5
ILB	Donnie Edwards	4
ILB	Randall Godfrey	3
OLB	Steve Foley	4
CB	Quentin Jammer	3
CB	Drayton Florence	3
SS	Terrence Kiel	2
FS	Marlon McCree	3

#### SPECIALISTS

K	Nate Kaeding	3
P	Mike Scifres	5
KR	Cletis Gordon	2
PR	Cletis Gordon	2
LS	David Binn	4

Players rated 1-5, with 5 highest



ARIC GRABB FOR SN

## 4 Oakland RAIDERS

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** Coordinator **Rob Ryan** has the personnel to make the 4-3 his base defense. The team added speed and playmaking ability by selecting SS **Michael Huff** and OLB **Thomas Howard** with its first two draft picks—and both are expected to start. Starting opposite Howard will be **Sam Williams**, who missed last season with a knee injury. Williams is fast and strong and can blitz and cover, but can he stay healthy? Special teams figure to be a strength. K **Sebastian Janikowski** is poised to rebound from his worst season, and **Shane Lechler** is one of the league's best punters. DB **Chris Carr** excelled on kick returns last season and has worked hard to improve as a punt returner. WR **Randy Moss** is healthy, and, assuming he meshes with new QB **Aaron Brooks**, could approach his career averages (79 catches, 1,268 yards, 12 TDs). RB **LaMont Jordan** will benefit from pushing himself harder in the offseason.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** Three of the projected starters on the offensive line are playing different positions than they played last year. **Robert Gallery** moves from right tackle to left tackle, **Barry Sims** goes from left tackle to left guard, and **Langston Walker** moves from left guard back to right tackle. The line also will rely on RG **Paul McQuistan**, a rookie, and C **Jake Grove**, who is battling a shoulder injury. First-year offensive coordinator **Tom Walsh's** scheme is heavy on running plays and downfield throws. Expect the offense to endure growing pains. WR **Jerry Porter** is unhappy with his role and wants to be traded. His desire to leave is threatening to be a divisive issue. Brooks has yet to prove he can play at a high level for an entire season. That doesn't bode well for a team that needs him to hit Moss with several deep balls every game for it to compete in the strong AFC West.

**CORKRAN'S BOTTOM LINE:** The Raiders look improved, but too many things need to go right for them to be considered playoff contenders. After all, they were 1-11 in the division the past two years. Success likely will be determined by how well new coach **Art Shell** lays the foundation for the future. —Steve Corkran



### SNAPSHOT

with CB **Nnamdi Asomugha**

**Can't-miss weekly dining tradition:** Thursday nights at Zack Crockett's house. Every week. He's the best chef on the team.

**Weirdest pregame ritual:** Jarrod Cooper's. He takes a shower, shaves his whole body, gets an IV bag, puts Polo sports cologne on his jersey and then puts on his headphones.

**Funniest trash-talker:** It would have to be Randy Moss because he trash-talks just to get himself going. He's liable to say anything just to get a laugh.

**Worst ride:** That would be mine. One of my cars that I drive to practice is a 1996 Nissan Maxima. It has a doughnut tire that I've just never fixed. It's never washed. The leather on the seats is off. It's my practice-day car. It gets good mileage, too.

**Huddle moment:** My second year, I don't remember who the linebacker was, but the guy who was calling the plays didn't know what it was. So we had a few guys throwing out plays that we should run. Time was running out. We went with what Charles Woodson said.

**Beware of this guy in the locker room:** Doug Gabriel. One year, Doug put a shoe box in my locker. It said "Nike" on it. I thought it was some Nike shoes. Inside was a live snake.

**Unique vanity plate:** Warren Sapp has "QBKILLA."

### STARTING LINEUP

#### OFFENSE

WR	Randy Moss	5
LT	Robert Gallery	3
LG	Barry Sims	3
C	Jake Grove	3
RG	Paul McQuistan	2
RT	Langston Walker	2
TE	Courtney Anderson	3
WR	Jerry Porter	3
QB	Aaron Brooks	2
FB	Zack Crockett	3
RB	LaMont Jordan	4

#### DEFENSE

LE	Derrick Burgess	5
DT	Tommy Kelly	3
DT	Warren Sapp	3
RE	Tyler Brayton	2
OLB	Sam Williams	3
MLB	Kirk Morrison	4
OLB	Thomas Howard	2
CB	Nnamdi Asomugha	3
CB	Fabian Washington	2
SS	Michael Huff	3
FS	Stuart Schweigert	3

#### SPECIALISTS

K	Sebastian Janikowski	3
P	Shane Lechler	5
KR	Chris Carr	5
PR	Chris Carr	2
LS	Adam Treu	5

Players rated 1-5, with 5 highest



8. Anquan Boldin  
1,320 • 7

9. Chris Chambers  
1,095 • 10

10. Hines Ward  
1,034 • 10

11. Reggie Wayne  
1,147 • 8

12. Plaxico Burress  
1,187 • 7

13. Darrell Jackson  
1,082 • 7

14. Santana Moss  
1,218 • 6



## EAST

## SCOUTS VIEWS

**COWBOYS** This is the most talent **Bill Parcells** has had in Dallas—on both sides of the ball. ... As long as they're winning and **Terrell Owens** is catching passes and scoring TDs, it'll be all good. But you know what's going to happen if it doesn't work out that way. ... I know **Mike Vanderjagt** did well in Indianapolis kicking in a dome, but if he has to kick in Philly, Giants Stadium or Washington late in the year, I think the elements will be a challenge for him. **GIANTS** They need **Eli Manning** to take that next step and be the guy. He struggled at the end of last season. In the big games where they really needed him, he didn't come through. ... **Tiki Barber** is amazing. Other than not having great size, he's got the whole package. There's nothing he can't do as a running back other than pound it inside in short-yardage or goal-line situations. ... **LaVar Arrington** brings some swagger to the defense, but I don't know if he'll provide the impact they'd like. **REDSKINS** They're a very talented team, but they don't have much depth on the offensive line and I want to see if **Mark Brunell** can make it through another season. Based on what I saw of **Todd Collins**, I can't be too excited if Brunell goes down. ... **Marcus Washington** is a very good linebacker. He's kind of the heart and soul of the defense. ... I don't know that **Andre Carter** was a huge upgrade for them. He's a pretty good nickel pass rusher, but I'm not sold on him as an every-down player. **EAGLES** I don't see a go-to receiver on their roster. If I'm a defensive coordinator, I don't look at that offense and say, "We need to game-plan to take this guy out." ... I think their defense will carry them more so than in the past. With the additions of **Darren Howard** and **Brodrick Bunkley**, they're going to have a good line and be able to generate a lot of pressure with their guys up front.



Brunell

JOHN DUNN FOR SN

STARTING LINEUP  
OFFENSE

WR	Terrell Owens	5
LT	Flozell Adams	3
LG	Kyle Kosier	2
C	Andre Gurode	3
RG	Marco Rivera	3
RT	Marc Colombo	2
TE	Jason Witten	5
WR	Terry Glenn	4
QB	Drew Bledsoe	3
TE	Anthony Fasano	3
RB	Julius Jones	3

## DEFENSE

LE	Marcus Spears	3
NT	Jason Ferguson	3
RE	Chris Canty	3
OLB	DeMarcus Ware	4
ILB	Bradie James	4
ILB	Akin Ayodele	3
OLB	Greg Ellis	3
CB	Terence Newman	5
CB	Anthony Henry	4
SS	Roy Williams	5
FS	Keith Davis	3

## SPECIALISTS

K	Mike Vanderjagt	4
P	Mat McBriar	3
KR	Tyson Thompson	2
PR	Skyler Green	2
LS	L.P. Ladouceur	3

Players rated 1-5,  
with 5 highest

**SNAPSHOT**  
with NT Jason Ferguson

**Player I most hate to play against:** Our center, Andre Gurode, because he's so heavy and so hard to move. Every day I wake up and say, "This is going to be a long day because I have to wrestle with this big old bear."

**Beware of this guy in the locker room:** I play more jokes on people than anyone. One of my favorites is to dress up a garbage can in a uniform and stick it in front of one of my teammates' lockers to give him a little message.

**Bet you didn't know this about Bill Parcells:** He gives nicknames to almost all of the players.

**NFL initiation:** My first play in a game, I jumped offside. The next play, I got called for roughing the passer. Parcells took me out of the game and introduced me to the NFL on the sideline. I didn't know if I'd ever get in another game because he was so mad.

**Cheapest teammate:** Flozell Adams is the cheapest dude I know. He came up to me in camp and said we needed to go rent some movies. I told him to just order the movie off the TV in his room. He said, "Those movies are \$12; I can't do that." The guy is worth millions, but he doesn't want to spend 12 bucks on a movie.

BLOCKBUSTER  
VIDEO1 Dallas  
COWBOYS

## REASONS FOR

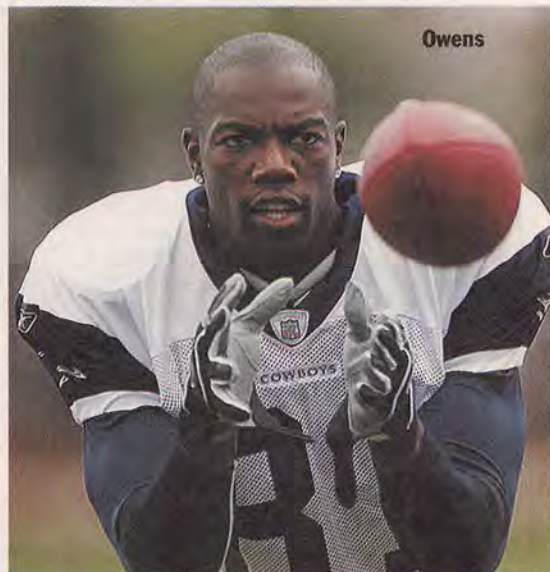
**OPTIMISM:** The defense has the potential to be an elite unit. It features a bevy of first-round picks—SS **Roy Williams**, CB **Terence Newman**, OLB **DeMarcus Ware**, LE **Marcus Spears** and OLB **Greg Ellis**—who are complemented by free-agent pickups such as NT **Jason Ferguson** and CB **Anthony Henry**. It will be stout against the run with **Spears** and **Ellis** on the left side. The secondary is expected to be one of the league's best.

**Newman** is capable of shadowing speedy receivers, and **Henry** (6-1, 207) can handle bigger, physical wideouts. Rookie **Pat Watkins**, who has excellent size (6-5, 211), range and instincts, is challenging for the starting free safety job. He has done a good job of making adjustments—a must for a free safety—and could be a perfect complement to the hard-hitting **Williams**. If QB **Drew Bledsoe** gets injured, **Tony Romo** could come in and play for a month and keep the team in contention because he's smart, has a good arm and manages the game well.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** The club lacks proven depth behind WRs **Terry Glenn** and **Terrell Owens**, both of whom are 32 and have a history of injuries. In addition, Owens is off to a rocky start in Dallas, which could spell trouble down the line.

**Patrick Crayton**, the No. 3 receiver, can make plays but also has an injury history. RT **Marc Colombo** has missed significant time in his career with a knee injury, needs to improve his technique and isn't athletic. But he's likely to win the right tackle job because **Rob Pettiti** also struggles with technique and **Jason Fabini** has been unimpressive. K **Mike Vanderjagt**, the NFL's all-time leader in field-goal accuracy, has been hampered by a groin injury and performed poorly in camp. If he can't hit field goals consistently, Parcells' conservative formula will be undermined.

**TAYLOR'S BOTTOM LINE:** The defense will be special, and if Owens and coach **Bill Parcells** get along, the offense will score enough points to win games. Look for the club to make the playoffs and win a postseason game for the first time since 1996. —Jean-Jacques Taylor



Owens

MATT SLOCUM / AP

## STAT PROJECTIONS WR Receiving yards • Receiving TDs

FS	15. Roy Williams	16. Andre Johnson	17. Donald Driver	18. Javon Walker	19. Derrick Mason	20. T.J. Houshmandzadeh	21. Deion Branch
	1,044 • 8	1,078 • 6	1,162 • 5	1,075 • 6	1,116 • 5	987 • 6	1,052 • 6



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STARTING LINEUP  
OFFENSE

WR	Amani Toomer	3
LT	Luke Petitgout	3
LG	David Diehl	3
C	Shaun O'Hara	3
RG	Chris Snee	4
RT	Kareem McKenzie	3
TE	Jeremy Shockey	5
WR	Plaxico Burress	4
QB	Eli Manning	3
FB	Jim Finn	3
RB	Tiki Barber	5

## DEFENSE

LE	Michael Strahan	5
DT	Fred Robbins	2
DT	William Joseph	2
RE	Osi Umenyiora	5
OLB	LaVar Arrington	3
MLB	Antonio Pierce	5
OLB	Carlos Emmons	3
CB	Sam Madison	3
CB	Corey Webster	3
SS	Gibril Wilson	3
FS	Will Demps	3

## SPECIALISTS

K	Jay Feely	4
P	Jeff Feagles	5
KR	Chad Morton	4
PR	Chad Morton	4
LS	Ryan Kuehl	5

Players rated 1-5,  
with 5 highest

2 New York  
GIANTS

Manning

ALBERT DICKSON / SN

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** The offense is loaded and can burn defenses many ways. When QB **Eli Manning** was on his game last year, the offense looked almost unstoppable, but he was shaky too often. Manning will be better with another year of experience, and he will have even more weapons around him. WR **Tim Carter** is healthy and provides a home run threat, and rookie WR **Sinorice Moss** eventually will be a dynamic playmaker. The 1-2 pass-rush punch of DEs **Michael Strahan** and **Osi Umenyiora** is unmatched. The depth at end also is good with **Justin Tuck** and first-round pick **Mathias Kiwanuka**, who is incredibly fast. RB **Tiki Barber**, 31, is getting better with age. He might be the most complete back in the NFL, and the Giants hope to get the ball in his hands even more. Another plus: This team is motivated. LBs **Antonio Pierce** and **LaVar Arrington** have huge chips on their shoulders after leaving the Redskins over the past two years. Strahan and Barber sense the end of the road and want one last shot at a ring.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** The defensive tackles are soft. **William Joseph** could end up splitting time with rookie **Barry Cofield**, and **Fred Robbins** will fill the nose tackle spot because no other candidate has emerged. The Giants will vary their fronts to try to hide the weakness, but teams will run right up the middle on them. All but six starters spent time on the sideline with injuries during camp. LT **Luke Petitgout** (back) and Arrington (knee) have injury/durability issues that will have to be managed all season. The new-look secondary may not be better than last year's version. The replacements are questionable, and though CB **R.W. McQuarters** adds depth, there's no guarantee the makeover will translate into more interceptions.

**VACCHIANO'S BOTTOM LINE:** The Giants will have one of the best offenses in the NFL, but the defense is a huge question mark. If that unit can be better than average, this team is a Super Bowl contender. If not, it could be in a fight for a playoff spot in a very tough division. —Ralph Vacchiano

ny  
SNAPSHOT

with LG David Diehl

**Funniest trash-talker:** LaVar Arrington was pretty funny when he was with Washington. He would say funny stuff about everything throughout the game. For some reason, me and LaVar always had something to talk about.

**My body on Monday morning:** Like I was in a car wreck 60 times in a row.

**Player I most hate to play against:** It was always a battle going up against La'Roi Glover. He's in St. Louis now, so we don't have to face him twice, but you know when you go up against him it is always a battle play in and play out.

**Most wired:** Jeremy Shockey. He's real intense. He's always yelling. He's always practicing hard.

**Cheapest teammate:** Shaun O'Hara. He definitely is a guy who likes to save his money.

**Rookie dues:** Offensive line-wise, rookies have to buy breakfast sandwiches and they have to buy pizza on Fridays. During lunchtime at training camp, all of the rookies have to get up on a chair, say they're a rookie, say their name, school and signing bonus, and then they have to sing a song other than their fight song.

**Worst thing about our training room:** There's only one hot tub. At the beginning of the week, it's nice and clean. But toward the end, I wouldn't trust anybody getting into that thing.

## STAT PROJECTIONS WR Receiving yards • Receiving TDs

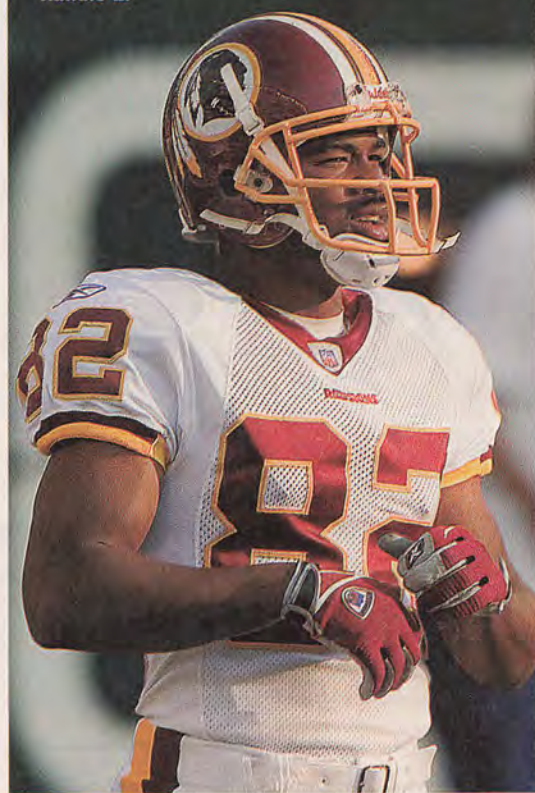
FS	22. Lee Evans	23. Joe Horn	24. Joey Galloway	25. Eddie Kennison	26. Nate Burleson	27. Donte' Stallworth	28. Rod Smith
	988 • 6	987 • 6	951 • 6	935 • 6	856 • 5	866 • 6	935 • 4

3 Washington  
REDSKINS

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** New WRs **Brandon Lloyd** and **Antwaan Randle El** give the offense the firepower it had lacked. If the two make defenses account for them on every play, WR **Santana Moss** will encounter fewer double-teams and make more plays downfield. The offensive line is close to becoming dominant. RT **Jon Jansen** and LT **Chris Samuels** are talented veterans, C **Casey Rabach** is smart and athletic, RG **Randy Thomas** feels revitalized after rehabbing a broken leg, and LG **Derrick Dockery** has lost weight and is more agile. The defense is relentless, well-coached and capable of confusing even the most experienced quarterbacks. Look for the team to put more pressure on the pocket because of the addition of RE **Andre Carter**. OLB **Marcus Washington** also will be used more as a pass rusher. Few coaches prepare their teams better than **Joe Gibbs**. He is paranoid about every opponent, and that helps his players focus on the upcoming game.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** The backups on the offensive line are mostly injured and/or inexperienced; the team can't afford to lose Jansen or Samuels. The defense couldn't afford to lose top CB **Shawn Springs** (abdominal surgery), but he could miss as many as three regular-season games. The team needs DT **Cornelius Griffin** to be healthy. He suffered a knee injury in the preseason but is expected to be ready for the opener. There also are questions about whether QB **Mark Brunell**, 35, will hold up after he wore down at the end of 2005. RB **Clinton Portis** has a separated shoulder but could be ready for the opener. The big question: Will the shoulder hold up? **Ladell**

Randle El



ALBERT DICKSON / SN



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## SNAPSHOT

with RG **Randy Thomas**

**Cheapest teammate:** Jon Jansen. It's the way he dresses. It's all T-shirts and jeans. He has shirts from 1960. He wears a lot of stripes and plaid shirts.

**NFL initiation:** I failed my conditioning test in New York under Bill Parcells, and I was called to his office and he chewed me a new one. He ran me to death every day until I got it.

**Road trip I like most:** Kansas City—that was good. I don't even know the name of the place we went. All I know is it was ribs and baked beans. We lost that game. Maybe that was the reason.

**Most wired:** Joe Bugel (assistant head coach/offense). He gets you wired and fired up for game day, practice day, just in life.

**Bet you didn't know this about Joe Gibbs:** He's a jokester. He's funny. He tells a couple of jokes here and there when he sees guys uptight.

**Beware of this guy in the locker room:**

Jon Jansen has gotten a couple of guys with spoiled food. He leaves it in their lockers. For some reason, it takes them a while to find it.

**Best thing about our training room:** Our new, improved hot tub. It's big and deep and comfortable.

**Worst thing about our locker room:** The short toilets. I like the tall, handicapped ones.

**Betts** is a fine backup, but defenses must account for Portis on every snap. Newly acquired RB **T.J. Duckett** will fill in for Portis and be used as a short-yardage and goal-line back.

### WOODY'S BOTTOM LINE:

The team seemed poised to make a run at the Super Bowl at the start of camp, but injury problems have the club scrambling. If the team has answers for potential problem spots, a division title is possible. If not, it will struggle to match last year's record. —Paul Woody

## STARTING LINEUP

### OFFENSE

WR	Santana Moss	5
LT	Chris Samuels	4
LG	Derrick Dockery	3
C	Casey Rabach	3
RG	Randy Thomas	4
RT	Jon Jansen	4
TE	Chris Cooley	4
WR	Brandon Lloyd	3
QB	Mark Brunell	3
FB	Mike Sellers	3
RB	Clinton Portis	5

### DEFENSE

LE	Phillip Daniels	3
DT	Joe Salave'a	3
DT	Cornelius Griffin	4
RE	Andre Carter	3
OLB	Warrick Holdman	3
MLB	Lemar Marshall	4
OLB	Marcus Washington	5
CB	Shawn Springs	4
CB	Carlos Rogers	3
SS	Adam Archuleta	3
FS	Sean Taylor	5

### SPECIALISTS

K	John Hall	3
P	Derrick Frost	2
KR	Ladell Betts	4
PR	Antwaan Randle El	5
LS	Elroy Albritton	5

Players rated 1-5, with 5 highest

# 4 Philadelphia EAGLES

## REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:

QB **Donovan McNabb** is healthy and in excellent shape. McNabb has carried a team without a ton of talent around him before, and he'll get the chance to do it again. The team improved its defensive line with the additions of free-agent RE **Darren Howard** and rookie T **Brodrick Bunkley**. Howard is better than any end the team has had opposite **Jevon Kearse** the past two seasons. Bunkley likely will be among the top defensive rookies in the league. In the secondary, CBs **Lito Sheppard** and **Sheldon Brown** are solid, and Ss **Brian Dawkins** and **Michael Lewis** rank among the best duos in the league. The return game might be just average, but the cover teams have some good young talent. K **David Akers** and P **Dirk Johnson** are back and healthy.

## REASONS FOR CONCERN:

Second-year WR **Reggie Brown** is being counted on to be the go-to guy, which is asking a lot of a young player. The rest of the receiving group includes rookies **Jason Avant** and undrafted **Hank Baskett** and backups

**Darmerien McCants** and **Greg Lewis**. RB **Brian Westbrook** suffered a foot sprain in the first series of the first preseason game and has not played since. Backup RB **Correll Buckhalter** is trying to come back from his third knee surgery in four years, and youngsters **Ryan Moats** and **Bruce Perry** also have been injured. OLB **Matt McCoy** is undersized and can't be counted on to be solid through the entire season. His top backup, **Shawn Barber**, has played a total of 11 games the past two years. OLB **Dhani Jones** won the job by default when **Greg Richmond** had back surgery and rookie **Chris Gocong** showed he wasn't ready.

**ECKEL'S BOTTOM LINE:** McNabb needs an MVP-type season to get the team back over .500 and into the playoffs, but there do not seem to be enough weapons for the Eagles to re-emerge as Super Bowl contenders. If all goes well, nine victories and a wild-card berth are possible. —Mark Eckel



Reggie Brown

ALBERT DICKSON / SN

## STARTING LINEUP

### OFFENSE

WR	Reggie Brown	3
LT	William Thomas	3
LG	Todd Herremans	2
C	Jamaal Jackson	3
RG	Shawn Andrews	4
RT	Jon Runyan	4
TE	L.J. Smith	3
WR	Hank Baskett	1
QB	Donovan McNabb	5
FB	Josh Parry	2
RB	Brian Westbrook	3

### DEFENSE

LE	Jevon Kearse	3
DT	Mike Patterson	3
DT	Brodrick Bunkley	3
RE	Darren Howard	3
OLB	Dhani Jones	2
MLB	Jeremiah Trotter	4
OLB	Matt McCoy	2
CB	Lito Sheppard	3
CB	Sheldon Brown	4
SS	Michael Lewis	4
FS	Brian Dawkins	5

### SPECIALISTS

K	David Akers	5
P	Dirk Johnson	4
KR	J.R. Reed	2
PR	Reno Mahe	3
LS	Mike Bartrum	4

Players rated 1-5, with 5 highest



## SNAPSHOT

with TE **L.J. Smith**

**NFL initiation:** My first training camp, two-a-days. I couldn't control it, and I threw up all over myself.

**Worst ride:** Reno Mahe's. I think he's driving a 1991 Blazer. It's a piece of junk.

**Can't-miss weekly dining tradition:** The corn fritters. I can't put them down. I probably eat five or six of them every week. They're the best.



ROBERT VOETS / CBS

**Beware of this guy in the locker room:** Shawn Andrews. People don't realize it, and that's what makes him so good at it.

**Favorite way to spend my day off:** Wake up early. Eat a big breakfast. Take a nap. Get a massage. Take another nap. Eat a nice dinner. Watch *King of Queens*. Go to bed.

**Most memorable slobberknocker:** Last year, I hit Lemar Marshall from Washington, got under him and hit him pretty good. I knocked myself

out. He was bleeding and stumbling around, but he stayed in the game. I was knocked out.

**Unique vanity plate:** I guess "TROT SPOT" (Jeremiah Trotter's). He's advertising his car washes.

**My body on Monday morning:** It feels like I'm 50 years old instead of 20-something. I'm like a different person. I feel that way most of the week. Then come Sunday, I don't know if it's adrenaline or what, but I'm back.

## STAT PROJECTIONS WR Receiving yards • Receiving TDs

<b>FS</b> 29. Muhsin Muhammad	30. Laveranues Coles	31. Drew Bennett	32. Reggie Brown	33. Michael Clayton	34. Keyshawn Johnson	35. Matt Jones
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NFC  
N O R T H

## SCOUTS VIEWS



BOB LEVERONE / SN

**The Vikings' defensive line again will benefit from Williams' silent but deadly style.**

**BEARS** As long as their starters stay healthy, they have a good chance to repeat as division champs. ... It seems to me **Thomas Jones** carried their offense—emotionally and physically—for the greater part of last year. They might run into some issues chemistrywise if **Cedric Benson** is anointed the starter instead of actually beating him out. ... The line play really is what sets the tempo for the defense. Those guys get off the ball quick, which allows **Brian Urlacher** and **Lance Briggs** to get to the ball. **VIKINGS** There's a learning curve to **Brad Childress'** offense. I think it takes some time to develop. Until they get a couple games into the season and everyone is on the same page, I think they're going to struggle. ... I've always been a **Pat Williams** fan. If he plays at the level he did last year, he quietly gives them a playmaker at defensive tackle. ... **Steve Hutchinson** was a good addition at guard. He's strong, with good balance and body control. Once he locks up on his man, you don't see that man slipping off and making many plays.

**LIONS** I think **Mike Martz** will open up the field for that offense. You'll see a lot more 15- to 20-yard passes to those big receivers. ... The strength of their team is probably the front four on defense. They have a lot of versatility, a lot of talented athletes. ... The guy who's kind of been forgotten in the whole deal is **Kevin Jones**. He might be the X-factor. **PACKERS** **Brett Favre** still has it—without a doubt. If you're an opposing team and he's within striking distance in the fourth quarter, you've got to go, "Uh-oh." ... I don't think anyone knows what **Robert Ferguson** will do week in and week out at receiver. He's a work in progress. ... They'll miss **Ryan Longwell**—immensely. There aren't many guys who know how to kick in the elements like he does.

STARTING LINEUP  
OFFENSE

WR	Bernard Berrian	2
LT	John Tait	4
LG	Ruben Brown	3
C	Olin Kreutz	5
RG	Roberto Garza	3
RT	Fred Miller	3
TE	Desmond Clark	2
WR	Muhsin Muhammad	3
QB	Rex Grossman	2
FB	Jason McKie	1
RB	Thomas Jones	4

## DEFENSE

LE	Adewale Ogunleye	5
DT	Tommie Harris	5
DT	Ian Scott	3
RE	Alex Brown	4
OLB	Hunter Hillenmeyer	3
MLB	Brian Urlacher	5
OLB	Lance Briggs	5
CB	Charles Tillman	2
CB	Nathan Vasher	4
SS	Mike Brown	4
FS	Chris Harris	2

## SPECIALISTS

K	Robbie Gould	3
P	Brad Maynard	4
KR	Rashied Davis	2
PR	Devin Hester	3
LS	Patrick Mannelly	5

Players rated 1-5,  
with 5 highest

1 Chicago  
BEARS

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** The Bears won 11 games last season with rookie QB **Kyle Orton** as the primary starter; they expect to improve with **Rex Grossman** running the show and **Brian Griese** backing him up. Grossman can push the ball downfield to WR **Muhsin Muhammad**. Improving a passing attack that averaged just 125.1 yards per game will open running lanes for RBs **Thomas Jones** and **Cedric Benson**. Jones is expected to be the team's opening day starter, but Benson will be worked into the offense after he returns from a shoulder injury and eventually could earn the starting job with strong play. The offensive line is a strength, led by five-time Pro Bowl C **Olin Kreutz**. MLB **Brian Urlacher**, the reigning defensive player of the year, is in his prime. DT **Tommie Harris** is becoming a force; opposing offensive lines have to

scheme to stop him. The division again is shaky because the three other NFC North teams have new coaching staffs.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:**

Grossman has been knocked out by major injuries two straight years, so relying on him is risky. SS **Mike Brown** was shut down after the first exhibition game because of a strained left Achilles' tendon. The company line was that it simply was a precautionary measure. Losing him for any amount of time would be devastating; the Bears are not the same team without their emotional leader. CB **Charles Tillman** remains an enigma. Teams with

prolific passing games, such as Cincinnati and Carolina, lit up the secondary at times last season, and Tillman seemed to have confidence issues. If he doesn't become more consistent, the defense will have a hole to fill.

**BIGGS' BOTTOM LINE:**

What the organization discovered in Grossman's absence was it has a Super Bowl-ready defense and dependable running game, two elements needed for a deep playoff run. Expectations have not been this high since **Mike Ditka** stalked the Soldier Field sideline. A division title is likely, but a trip to the Super Bowl will depend on whether the offense—led by Grossman or Griese—is good enough. —Brad Biggs



Grossman

MICHAEL McMANARA / SN

C  
SNAPSHOT  
with OLB Lance Briggs

**Weirdest pregame ritual:** Brendon Ayanbadejo really likes to rub a whole lot of cream all over his arms and chest. He thoroughly lathers himself up. He's very creamy. He must want to keep his skin nice.

**Unique vanity plate:** My license plate includes my nickname, Berger. I've had that nickname since I was a kid. My mom gave it to me.

**Funniest trash-talker:** Tommie Harris is one. He uses Jesus and God a lot. He'll just yell at someone, "You need Jesus in your life!" and it's funny because he has that high-pitched voice. "You need Jesus!" he yells in the middle of an argument. Usually, the guy gets stuck or else he responds, "I have Jesus!"

**Most wired:** Bob Babich (linebackers coach). He's always flailing. No one flails better than him. He's fired up in the meeting room—he seems like he's always on caffeine. We used to have a deal where if he blurted something out during practice, we'd mark it on the board. He'd blurt something out to help a player. It could be, "You gotta get back." But he has cut down on his blurts. We don't even tally them anymore.

**Favorite way to spend my day off:** With my bulldog, Charles Bronson. You've got to have a death wish if you want to mess with my dog.

STAT PROJECTIONS **WR** Receiving yards • Receiving TDs

<b>FS</b>	36. Terry Glenn 801 • 3	37. Isaac Bruce 875 • 5	38. Braylon Edwards 846 • 4	39. David Givens 733 • 4	40. Eric Moulds 817 • 4	41. Kevin Curtis 752 • 4	42. Keenan McCardell 727 • 4
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## 2 Minnesota VIKINGS

### STARTING LINEUP OFFENSE

WR	Troy Williamson	2
LT	Bryant McKinnie	4
LG	Steve Hutchinson	5
C	Matt Birk	3
RG	Artis Hicks	3
RT	Marcus Johnson	2
TE	Jim Kleinsasser	3
WR	Travis Taylor	3
QB	Brad Johnson	3
FB	Tony Richardson	3
RB	Chester Taylor	3

### DEFENSE

LE	Erasmus James	3
DT	Kevin Williams	3
DT	Pat Williams	4
RE	Kenechi Udeze	2
OLB	Ben Leber	2
MLB	Napoleon Harris	2
OLB	E.J. Henderson	2
CB	Antoine Winfield	4
CB	Fred Smoot	3
SS	Dwight Smith	3
FS	Darren Sharper	4

### SPECIALISTS

K	Ryan Longwell	4
P	Chris Kluwe	2
KR	Mewelde Moore	3
PR	Mewelde Moore	3
LS	Cullen Loeffler	4

Players rated 1-5,  
with 5 highest

### REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:

Expect the offensive line to be much better. In training camp,

LG **Steve Hutchinson** was every bit the mauler the team had hoped he would be.

LT **Bryant McKinnie**, despite a fractured finger in his right hand, appeared to mesh well with Hutchinson.

QB **Brad Johnson** is perfect for this situation. He won a Super Bowl running an offense similar to this

one. Johnson has been accurate in the short game. His experience qualifies him as a coach on the field. Assuming he stays healthy, he gives the team a good chance to win. A new, aggressive cover 2 scheme will maximize the skills of a talented defensive line. Ts **Pat Williams** and **Kevin Williams** can create havoc inside. Es **Erasmus James** and **Kenechi Udeze** have been given simple instructions: Get upfield.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** Depth at receiver is a big concern, especially after the team cut No. 1 WR **Koren Robinson**. The pressure is on **Troy Williamson**, but it is uncertain whether he is ready to be a top-flight receiver. **Travis Taylor** is a solid possession receiver but won't scare anyone deep. The team's best receiver might be TE **Jermaine Wiggins**. The linebacker position still is uncertain despite a strong training camp by OLB **E.J. Henderson**. The season-ending knee injury suffered by rookie **Chad Greenway** further depleted the depth of the unit. Newcomer **Ben Leber** rarely makes mistakes but didn't make many big plays during camp, and MLB **Napoleon Harris** never has been a reliable full-time starter.

**SEIFERT'S BOTTOM LINE:** The team has improved in some areas, including at offensive line and running back, but its talent has eroded at other positions. Coach **Brad Childress** has run an organized camp and preseason, and his team is expected to have the mettle to grind out wins in close games. Still, it figures to be difficult for the team to improve on last season's 9-7 record. —Kevin Seifert



Williamson

BOB LEVERONE / SN

## 3 Detroit LIONS

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** When you combine the hands of WR **Roy Williams** with the legs of RB **Kevin Jones** and the brains of coordinator **Mike Martz**, good things are going to happen. The Lions will be much more explosive on offense, and Martz will lean on the two stars in an effort to create opportunities for the rest of the unit. QB **Jon Kitna** has a good arm and plays smart, but his greatest quality is his leadership. New coach **Rod Marinelli**'s defensive line expertise will take the line from good to dominant. Look for T **Shaun Rogers** to remain a standout and be more consistent. Everyone else on the line will benefit from Marinelli's teaching skills, especially E **Kalimba Edwards**, who must become a better pass-rushing threat.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** Teams that switch to a disciplined one-gap defensive system often start slowly because it's a tough scheme to execute. When a gap is opened, it usually results in a big play and gets an offense cranked up. Three key players in the new defense—Rogers and LBs **Boss Bailey** and **Teddy Lehman**—are behind in executing the system because

they've missed almost all of training camp with injuries. The team has issues at cornerback.

**Dre' Bly** has to bounce back from a subpar season. **Fernando Bryant** is the other starter mostly by default. When healthy, he hasn't performed to expectations. The Lions—perhaps more than upgrading their talent, scheme or anything else—must make an attitude adjustment, and that's easier said than done.

After five straight seasons of double-digit losses, many of these players don't know what it takes to be winners in the NFL.

### KOWALSKI'S BOTTOM LINE:

The Lions will be playoff contenders soon. The only question is whether it will be this season. With a new coach bringing in new and complicated offensive and defensive systems—both are proven winning strategies, by the way—it's going to take time for the Lions to absorb and execute them properly. But the talent is there on both sides of the football. —Tom Kowalski

### STARTING LINEUP OFFENSE

WR	Roy Williams	4
LT	Jeff Backus	4
LG	Ross Verba	3
C	Dominic Raiola	3
RG	Damien Woody	3
RT	Rex Tucker	2
TE	Casey FitzSimmons	3
WR	Corey Bradford	3
QB	Jon Kitna	3
FB	Cory Schlesinger	3
RB	Kevin Jones	3

### DEFENSE

LE	Cory Redding	3
DT	Shaun Cody	2
DT	Shaun Rogers	5
RE	James Hall	3
OLB	Ernie Sims	3
MLB	Boss Bailey	3
OLB	Teddy Lehman	3
CB	Fernando Bryant	2
CB	Dre' Bly	3
SS	Kenoy Kennedy	3
FS	Daniel Bullocks	2

### SPECIALISTS

K	Jason Hanson	4
P	Nick Harris	5
KR	Eddie Drummond	4
PR	Eddie Drummond	4
LS	Don Muhlbach	4

Players rated 1-5,  
with 5 highest

### SNAPSHOT with RB Mewelde Moore

**Beware of this guy in the locker room:** I'd have to say Pat Williams. He'll get anybody at any time. I remember seeing him put some bikes on the roof of a dorm room last year.

**NFL initiation:** In my rookie year, we were playing Houston and Mr. Robaire Smith came from behind me and hit me in the back when I was running the ball. He hit me so hard that it was like he pushed my back to my front.

**Cheapest teammate:** Some guys would probably say me, and I probably couldn't disagree with that. But Ciatrick Fason, Daddy Fason, he's right up there with me.

**Road trip I like most:** Green Bay. I mean, how can a guy who loves football not love playing at **Lambeau Field**?

**Funniest trash-talker:** I would say Jermaine Wiggins. He's from Boston, and he's always talking about the Red Sox and everything else having to do with Boston.

**Favorite way to spend my day off:** Sleeping. I don't know an NFL player who wouldn't tell you that.

**Nobody knows this about the Metrodome:** If you haven't played there, you'll think it's a rock concert when you get in there.



JAY DROWNS / SN

### STAT PROJECTIONS WR Receiving yards • Receiving TDs

FS 43. Ernest Wilford 724 • 4	44. Mark Clayton 643 • 4	45. Roddy White 730 • 4	46. Troy Williamson 687 • 4	47. Antonio Bryant 780 • 3	48. Jerry Porter 722 • 4	49. Joe Jurevicius 603 • 4
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Jones

## SNAPSHOT

with WR Roy Williams

### Beware of this guy in the locker room:

Dominic Raiola. He's the prankster, and he doesn't wear a towel ... to anything.

**My body on Monday morning:** I'm like a 78-year-old man. I take itty-bitty steps in the morning, and it's very ugly. I'm glad I'm the only one there.

**Road trip I like most:** Going back to Dallas. It's going back home and it's Texas Stadium, the ring of honor, the history.

**Unique vanity plate:** Daniel Bullocks has a Mercedes S550 and his plate says "DMAN," but I don't know if it means Da Man or Daniel Man or Defensive Man.

### Can't-miss weekly dining tradition:

Pizza Hut on Monday night. I tune in with a large stuffed crust. I have it delivered.

### Most memorable slobberknocker:

(Dallas') Roy Williams my rookie year. He hit Tai Streets, and then he looked at me and gave the "horns down" as he stood over him. They came and got Tai off the field. The "horns down" thing is something (Oklahoma) does (to Texas players). It's disrespect.

**Most wired:** Both coordinators, especially Mike Martz. I've never heard so many f-bombs come out of somebody's mouth. He wants it done right—and if you don't do it right, you'll do it right the next time, I'll promise you that.

# 4 Green Bay PACKERS

## STARTING LINEUP

### OFFENSE

WR	Robert Ferguson	2
LT	Chad Clifton	4
LG	Jason Spitz	1
C	Scott Wells	2
RG	Tony Moll	1
RT	Mark Tauscher	4
TE	Bubba Franks	2
WR	Donald Driver	4
QB	Brett Favre	4
FB	William Henderson	2
RB	Ahman Green	3

### DEFENSE

LE	Aaron Kampman	3
DT	Ryan Pickett	3
DT	Colin Cole	2
RE	Kabeer Gbaja-Biamila	3
OLB	Brady Poppinga	2
MLB	Nick Barnett	3
OLB	A.J. Hawk	3
CB	Charles Woodson	3
CB	Al Harris	4
SS	Marquand Manuel	3
FS	Nick Collins	4

### SPECIALISTS

K	Dave Rayner	1
P	Jon Ryan	1
KR	Greg Jennings	2
PR	Charles Woodson	3
LS	Rob Davis	4

Players rated 1-5,  
with 5 highest

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** QB Brett Favre appears to have taken to new coach Mike McCarthy's system, which is similar to what Favre ran under former coach Mike Holmgren. Favre seems willing to accept McCarthy's demand to be smart with the ball. Look for Favre to fling the ball downfield less and change plays based on the defensive alignment more often. If CB Al Harris plays as well as he did last year and CB Charles Woodson stays healthy, they will be able to lock down receivers in man-to-man coverage and allow coordinator Bob Sanders to blitz when he wants and play zone coverage in the middle of the field. Rookie A.J. Hawk and second-year pro Brady Poppinga will improve the speed at outside linebacker. If the defensive tackles can occupy blockers, Hawk, Poppinga and MLB Nick Barnett can use their speed to flush out running plays and cover backs and tight ends.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** Aside from Donald Driver and impressive rookie Greg Jennings,

the club has seen little from its wide receivers. Robert Ferguson and Rod Gardner have been nonfactors in the preseason. Driver is going to receive all the attention from defenses, and it's going to be hard to get him the ball in clutch situations. With rookie Gs Tony Moll and Jason Spitz and a new zone-blocking scheme, it will take time for the offensive line to come together. The kicking game is going to cause McCarthy some indigestion. K Dave Rayner and P Jon Ryan are unproven and could implode. Given the tough weather conditions late in the season, there is plenty of reason for concern. Depth at safety could be a huge issue. The club is fine with SS Marquand Manuel and FS Nick Collins, but if either starter gets hurt, next in line is rookie Tyrone Culver, a sixth-round pick.

### SILVERSTEIN'S BOTTOM LINE:

This team is too young to contend. The best the club can hope for is a strong finish to build momentum for next year. —Tom Silverstein



Hawk

## SNAPSHOT

with RT Mark Tauscher

**Worst ride:** Jason Spitz's. He didn't like the gas prices, so he went out and bought a Scion. It's one of those small little box cars, and when you pile in all the linemen, it looks like clowns when they're getting out.

**Funniest trash-talker:** It has to be Whit (William Whitticker). One time, some defensive lineman said to him, "Keep your hands off my face." And Whitticker said to him, "You keep your face off my hands." That was a good one.

**Don't mess with this guy in the locker room:** Grey Ruegamer. Anyone with the Giants, beware. Cliff (Chad Clifton) got a brand-new Escalade last year right off the lot. (Ruegamer) put confetti in his fans and when he went to turn his heat on, it blew all over him. Even in March, it was still coming out. He's good.



**NFL initiation:** In my second game, we're in Buffalo and I'm lining up on the field-goal unit. I had Pat Williams and Ted Washington lined up on me, and I literally got blown off the ball 5 yards. When I got back to the sideline, Frank Winters says, "Hey, you better anchor up in there, kid." I was like, "Here I am."

**Worst thing about our locker room:** We don't have enough backgammon boards. Too many people have taken it up. We can't get a game in.

## STAT PROJECTIONS TE Receiving yards • Receiving TDs

1. Antonio Gates  
1,014 • 9

2. Jeremy Shockey  
857 • 7

3. Tony Gonzalez  
912 • 6

4. Todd Heap  
816 • 5

5. Alge Crumpler  
803 • 5

6. Chris Cooley  
832 • 6

7. Jason Witten  
807 • 5



## S O U T H

## SCOUTS VIEWS

**PANTHERS** They're the team to watch in the NFC. I think they're by far the most balanced offense and defense in terms of talent, and they have good depth. ... It's about time **Jake Delhomme** gets his due. He's proven he's a legitimate upper-tier quarterback. ... **Chris Gamble** is a really talented, scary kid. He does everything you want him to do. He should be a Pro Bowl corner—if not this year, then next year. **BUCCANEERS** **Chris Simms** had a very good season last year, and I think he's only going to get better. If they're not playing catch-up all the time, we'll see a big jump in Chris' ability to manage a game. ... **Derrick Brooks** is still a very good athlete; he's just not at the elite level he once was. Toward the end of last season, I saw him struggling to get off blocks. ... I think they'll miss (former defensive line coach) **Rod Marinelli** a lot.

The pass rush they could generate with just four guys was what helped make that defense run as efficiently as it did.

**FALCONS** **John Abraham's** great natural pass-rush ability and the uncertainty of where he's going to line up make it hard to get your guys in position to protect the quarterback. ...

**Roddy White** has turned out to be even better than I expected. He has all

**Brooks still is a handful to block, but he's not the menace he once was.**

the talent and skills to be a big-play receiver for **Michael Vick**. ... **Patrick Kerney** plays at 110 percent every snap, pass or run. Is he a premier defensive end? He's never been talked about that way, but every team in the league would like a guy like him on its roster. **SAINTS** I don't think their offense is going to be good enough to sustain 80-yard drives and methodically move the ball downfield. So having an explosive playmaker like **Reggie Bush** can change field position in a hurry. ... **Charles Grant** and **Will Smith** are two young, strong, athletic defensive ends maybe a lot of people don't know about.



ROBERT SEALE / SN

Predicted finish: 1 Panthers 13-3\* 2 Buccaneers 9-7\* 3 Falcons 5-11 4 Saints 4-12

STARTING LINEUP  
OFFENSE

WR	Keyshawn Johnson	3
LT	Travelle Wharton	3
LG	Mike Wahle	5
C	Justin Hartwig	3
RG	Evan Mathis	2
RT	Jordan Gross	4
TE	Kris Mangum	2
WR	Steve Smith	5
QB	Jake Delhomme	4
FB	Brad Hoover	3
RB	DeShaun Foster	3

## DEFENSE

LE	Julius Peppers	5
DT	Maake Kemoeatu	3
DT	Kris Jenkins	3
RE	Mike Rucker	4
OLB	Thomas Davis	3
MLB	Dan Morgan	4
OLB	Na'il Diggs	2
CB	Ken Lucas	4
CB	Chris Gamble	4
SS	Shaun Williams	2
FS	Mike Minter	3

## SPECIALISTS

K	John Kasay	3
P	Jason Baker	4
KR	DeAngelo Williams	3
PR	Chris Gamble	3
LS	Jason Kyle	4

Players rated 1-5,  
with 5 highest

SNAPSHOT  
with RT Jordan Gross

**Beware of these guys in the locker room:** It's a three-way tie with Brad Hoover, Jake Delhomme and Nick Goings. Jake Delhomme put deer urine on my jersey one time. Nick Goings is the silent one who will get you without you knowing it. Hoover comes with the full-frontal attack.

**Road trip I like most:** Atlanta. I like playing the Falcons because it's a big rivalry and we always get back home early.

**Can't-miss weekly dining tradition:** Every Sunday, I always have the same pregame meal: French toast, chicken breast, some broccoli and some pineapple. I don't know why, but that's what I have every week.

**Weirdest pregame ritual:** Mike Wahle and I have to play gin before every game. He beats me 90 percent of the time.

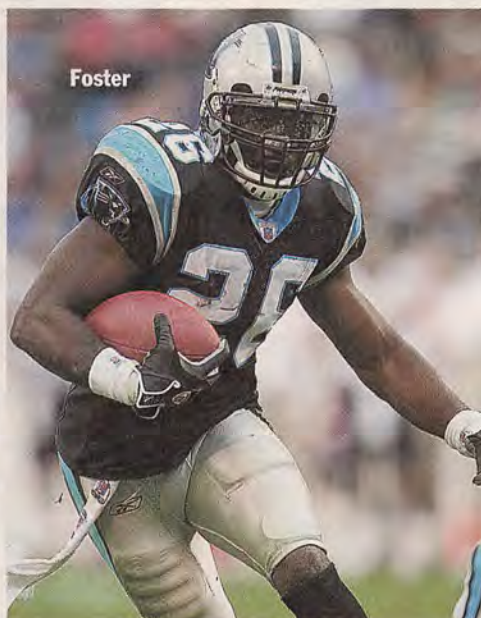
**Funniest trash-talker:** Rodney Harrison. He's really intense, but I get a kick out of him. He'll talk trash on one play and be smiling on the next play.

**Most wired:** Mike Maser (offensive line coach), by far. His blood pressure's got to be through the roof during practices and games.

**NFL initiation:** Day 1 of training camp my rookie year, I lined up against Julius Peppers and he bull-rushed me onto my tail end. I knew I had a long way to go.

1 Carolina  
PANTHERS

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** The shortcomings that became apparent in the NFC championship game loss last season have been addressed, and that could get the team over the hump. In **DeShaun Foster**, who is being given his first opportunity to be a feature back, and rookie **DeAngelo Williams**, the team has more speed than ever in the backfield and no longer will rely solely on running between the tackles. The line also was overhauled. C **Justin Hartwig** and RG **Evan Mathis** are younger and more athletic than predecessors **Jeff Mitchell** and **Tutan Reyes**. The team realized it needed a receiving option beyond WR **Steve Smith** and added **Keyshawn Johnson**, who is an effective possession receiver. DT **Maake Kemoeatu** was signed to help beef up a line that was undersized last year. If DT **Kris Jenkins** returns to full strength after missing most of the past two seasons, there will be nearly 700 pounds inside. That will jam the middle against the run and free up MLB **Dan Morgan** and Es **Julius Peppers** and **Mike Rucker** to make more big plays.



BOB LEVERONE / SN

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** Putting so much emphasis on Foster as the feature back is risky. He has had problems with injuries and fumbles. There will be two new starting linebackers. **Thomas Davis** is moving to linebacker after playing safety in college and during part of last season; he will need time to learn. **Na'il Diggs**, who has only average size, will be asked to be a run stuffer. Signing Johnson may have been a risky move. He has been considered a selfish player at some of his previous stops, and it will be a challenge to keep him and Smith happy.

**YASINSKAS' BOTTOM LINE:** On paper, this team is better than last year's. But the schedule is brutal, with a lot of physical games against NFC South and East teams. A division title is likely, but the Panthers will have to avoid injuries and get a home playoff game or two to go deep into the postseason. —Pat Yasinskas



## STAT PROJECTIONS TE Receiving yards • Receiving TDs

FS	8. Randy McMichael 698 • 5	9. L.J. Smith 753 • 4	10. Vernon Davis 761 • 4	11. Heath Miller 587 • 5	12. Kellen Winslow 565 • 4	13. Ben Troupe 524 • 5	14. Ben Watson 565 • 4
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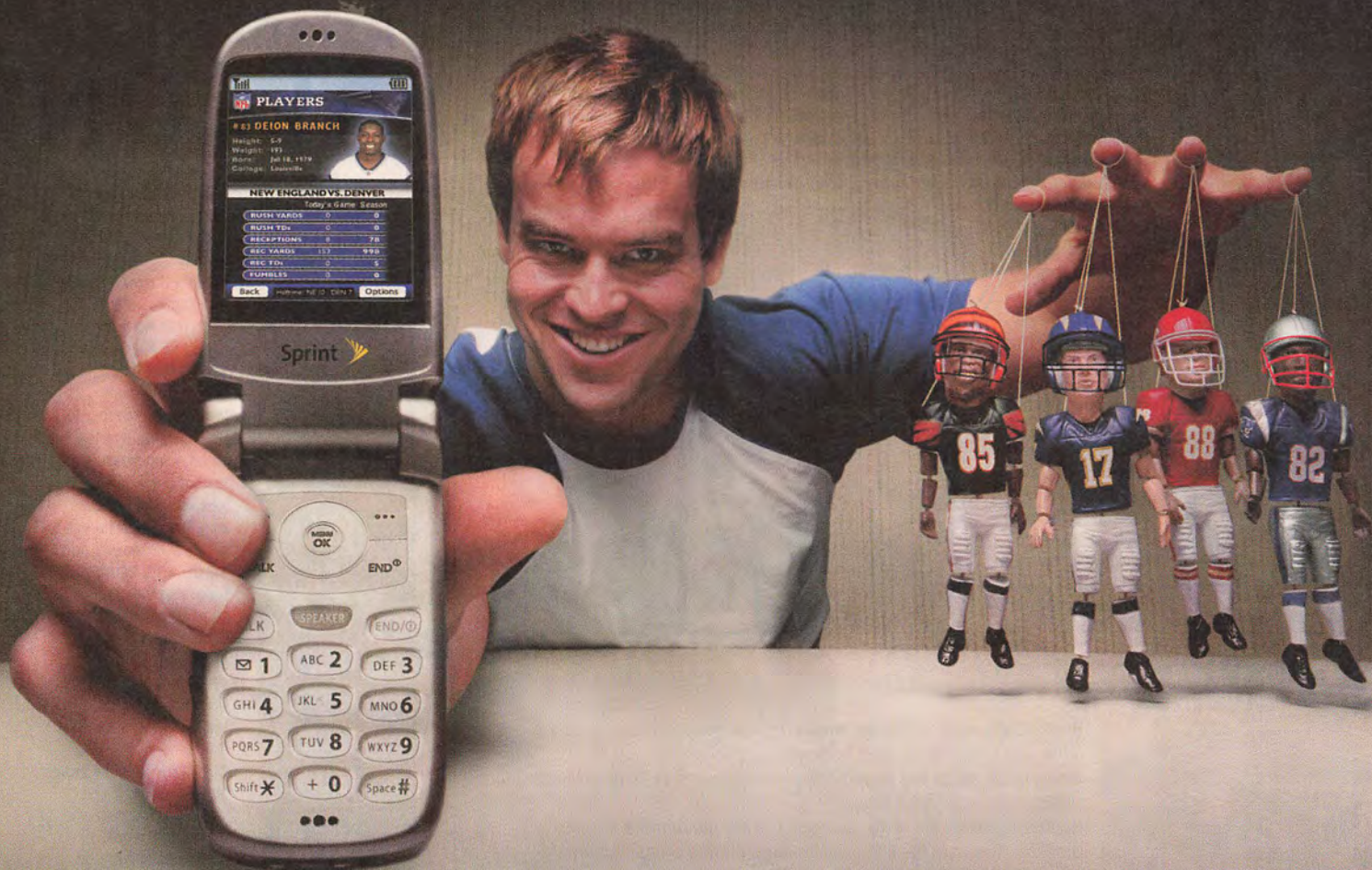
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## 2 Tampa Bay BUCCANEERS

### STARTING LINEUP OFFENSE

WR	Joey Galloway	4
LT	Anthony Davis	3
LG	Dan Buenning	3
C	John Wade	3
RG	Davin Joseph	3
RT	Kenyatta Walker	3
TE	Alex Smith	3
WR	Michael Clayton	3
QB	Chris Simms	3
FB	Mike Alstott	3
RB	Cadillac Williams	4

### DEFENSE

LE	Greg Spires	3
DT	Anthony McFarland	3
DT	Chris Hovan	4
RE	Simeon Rice	5
OLB	Ryan Nece	3
MLB	Shelton Quarles	4
OLB	Derrick Brooks	5
CB	Brian Kelly	4
CB	Ronde Barber	5
SS	Jermaine Phillips	4
FS	Will Allen	3

### SPECIALISTS

K	Matt Bryant	3
P	Josh Bidwell	5
KR	Michael Pittman	3
PR	Mark Jones	5
LS	Dave Moore	4

Players rated 1-5,  
with 5 highest

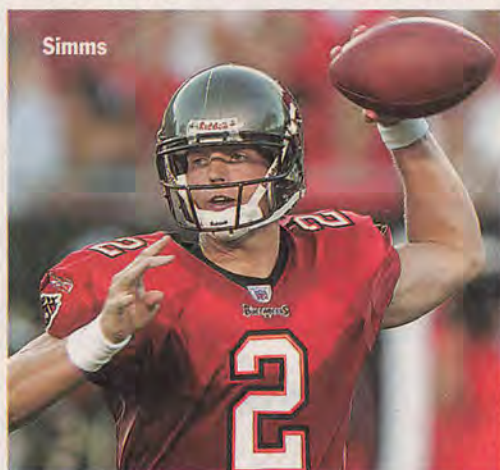
**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** QB **Chris Simms** throws deep balls with great accuracy, makes all the short and intermediate passes and usually is a good decision maker. He has an air of confidence about him now, and his teammates love him. The talent on offense is possibly the best the Bucs have had. RB **Cadillac Williams** has the ability to be a special player, TE **Alex Smith** has the potential to be one of the game's best red zone receivers, and **Joey Galloway**, **David Boston** and **Michael Clayton** lead a deep group of wide receivers. Clayton is healthy and focused again. Look for him to rebound and turn in a season similar to his stellar rookie campaign. The talent on the offensive line isn't exceptional, but it is deep. The defensive players keep getting older but never seem to show signs of aging. You wonder whether NT **Chris Hovan** can turn in another season like last year, but he has an exceptional attitude and work ethic.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** The team doesn't have much behind Simms. If he goes down with an injury, the Bucs' chances of doing anything significant may go down with him.

RT **Kenyatta Walker**, not the best player to begin with, is nursing a knee problem that could bother him all season. Walker needs to stay healthy and be more consistent for the offense to maximize its potential. The depth at safety is thin behind FS **Will Allen** and SS **Jermaine Phillips**. The team needs both players to stay healthy, and, based on Phillips' history, that's an iffy proposition. The defense is going through something of a transition period. It lost line coach **Rod Marinelli** (head coach, Lions) and secondary coach **Mike Tomlin** (defensive coordinator, Vikings). Linebackers coach **Joe Barry** is expected to move on after this season.

**CUMMINGS' BOTTOM LINE:** The Bucs are talented enough to win a division title and go deep in the playoffs. If they can avoid mistakes and injuries, they even could turn into Super Bowl contenders, but that might be asking too much given how many inexperienced players there are on offense.

—Roy Cummings



CHRIS O'MEARA / AP



## 3 Atlanta FALCONS

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** The team went to great lengths to improve its biggest weakness, the run defense; it acquired RE **John Abraham**, SS **Lawyer Milloy**, FS **Chris Crocker** and DT **Grady Jackson**. The return of run-stuffing

### STARTING LINEUP OFFENSE

WR	Roddy White	2
LT	Wayne Gandy	3
LG	Matt Lehr	2
C	Todd McClure	2
RG	Kynan Forney	3
RT	Todd Weiner	3
TE	Alge Crumpler	5
WR	Michael Jenkins	2
QB	Michael Vick	4
FB	Justin Griffith	4
RB	Warrick Dunn	5

### DEFENSE

LE	Patrick Kerney	4
DT	Grady Jackson	3
DT	Rod Coleman	5
RE	John Abraham	5
OLB	Michael Boley	3
MLB	Ed Hartwell	3
OLB	Keith Brooking	4
CB	DeAngelo Hall	5
CB	Jimmy Williams	2
SS	Lawyer Milloy	3
FS	Chris Crocker	2

### SPECIALISTS

K	Michael Koenen	3
P	Michael Koenen	4
KR	Allen Rossum	3
PR	Allen Rossum	4
LS	Boone Stutz	1

Players rated 1-5,  
with 5 highest

MLB **Ed Hartwell** from a torn Achilles' also will help. With Abraham in the lineup, LE **Patrick Kerney** and DT **Rod Coleman** will benefit from more favorable matchups. CB **DeAngelo Hall** is athletic and smart enough to shut down most receivers. The Falcons' zone-blocking schemes are as solid as ever and will allow RB **Warrick Dunn** and the ground game to sparkle. TE **Alge Crumpler** has a knack for getting open in key situations, and QB **Michael Vick** has the skills to move the chains.

### REASONS FOR CONCERN:

Until he proves otherwise, Vick will be labeled as a passer who makes poor reads, overthrows targets and uses improper mechanics. His erratic throwing makes things tough for starting WRs **Roddy White** and **Michael Jenkins**, who lack seasoning. Newcomer **Ashley Lelie** adds a needed speed element, but it will be tough for him to replace the production of No. 3 WR **Brian Finneran**, who's out for the

### SNAPSHOT

with LG **Dan Buenning**



**Best thing about our locker room:** The roaches seem to stay on the other side of the room, away from me.

**Worst thing about our locker room:** Snakes come in there once in a while to chase the mice around.

**Huddle moment:** We've got this young rookie quarterback, Bruce Gradkowski, and at the line of scrimmage, he was slapping John (Wade) in the butt. All you can hear is "whack, whack, whack," and you're thinking, "Geez, he's leaving a mark there, man." And then he's

calling out an audible and he walks away, then he walks back and he starts slapping him again. It was so hilarious that we all started laughing and we couldn't run the play.

**Funniest trash-talker:** Anthony Davis comes up with some really good stuff, comparing guys to TV people.

**Unique locker:** Sean Mahan's. He's got everything in correct order. He's got his shoes lined up perpendicular to the wall. He makes sure his towel is hung up and straight. And don't you touch anything in there and mess it up because he'll snap on you.

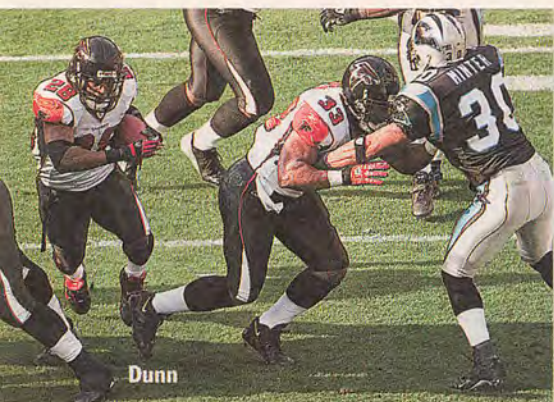
**My body on Monday morning:** It sounds like I'm walking on packing paper because everything's popping.

**Player I most hate to play against:** Anybody who talks a bunch of bullcrap.

### STAT PROJECTIONS TE Receiving yards • Receiving TDs

FS	15. Dallas Clark	506 • 4	16. Alex Smith	504 • 3	17. Jermaine Wiggins	562 • 2	18. Mercedes Lewis	402 • 3	19. Marcus Pollard	378 • 3	20. Erron Kinney	471 • 3	21. Bubba Franks	340 • 3
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BOB LEVERONE / SN

# 4 New Orleans SAINTS

## STARTING LINEUP OFFENSE

WR	Joe Horn	3
LT	Jammal Brown	3
LG	Jamar Nesbit	2
C	Jeff Faine	3
RG	Jermame Mayberry	2
RT	Jon Stinchcomb	1
TE	Mark Campbell	2
WR	Donte Stallworth	3
QB	Drew Brees	4
FB	Mike Karney	3
RB	Deuce McAllister	3

## DEFENSE

LE	Charles Grant	3
DT	Hollis Thomas	2
DT	Brian Young	2
RE	Will Smith	4
OLB	Scott Fujita	3
MLB	Alfred Fincher	1
OLB	Scott Shanle	1
CB	Mike McKenzie	3
CB	Fred Thomas	3
SS	Omar Stoutmire	2
FS	Josh Bullocks	3

## SPECIALISTS

K	John Carney	3
P	Mitch Berger	3
KR	Aaron Stecker	3
PR	Reggie Bush	4
LS	Kevin Houser	4

Players rated 1-5, with 5 highest

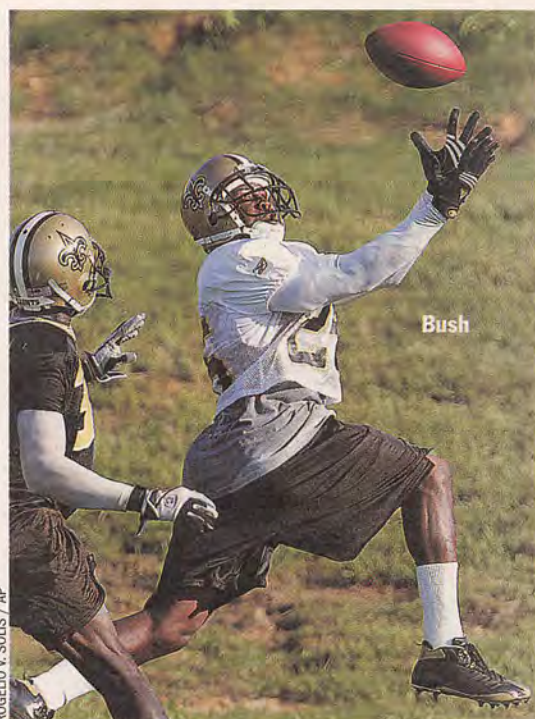
## REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:

**QB Drew Brees** gives the Saints a proven winner, the most competent and confidence-inspiring quarterback they've had since **Archie Manning**. Brees most likely will be relegated to a West Coast-style short passing game—more because of the shaky line than because of his surgically repaired shoulder—but his poise will keep the Saints in games. Rookie **RB Reggie Bush** gives the team an electrifying and elusive super athlete who is a true difference-maker.

When he's not turning a broken play into a big gain, he is drawing the defense's attention and opening things up for other players. The other major addition, coach **Sean Payton**, looks like a good hire. He spent the past three years working under **Bill Parcells** in Dallas, and it's clear he took notes.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** The Saints do not look polished on offense, defense or special teams. They're still moving around parts at a lot of positions, including offensive line, linebacker, defensive tackle and kick returner. The offensive line is a big concern. The Saints replaced three starters from last year's unit and moved second-year **T Jammal Brown** from the right side to the left, where he never has played. Brown is talented and athletic but has been inconsistent in his new role. The right side also is unstable with fourth-year pro **Jon Stinchcomb** starting for the first time; he missed all of last season with a major knee injury. The guards are decent but have had injury problems in camp. The defense has two strong pass rushers in **RE Will Smith** and **LE Charles Grant**, but it has a lot of holes. The already shaky linebacking unit was weakened when projected weakside starter **Anthony Simmons** retired. His replacement, **Tommy Polley** (shoulder), is out for a few weeks, and that leaves **Scott Shanle**, acquired from the Cowboys, as the stopgap starter. The Saints also aren't very strong or deep at corner.

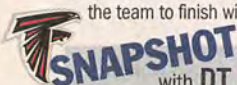
**TRIPLETT'S BOTTOM LINE:** Adding Bush and Brees has created more buzz than the Saints have produced in several years, but don't expect consistency in Year 1 of the rebuilding project. A 6-win season would be a nice start. —Mike Triplett



ROGELIO V. SOUS / AP

season. Pass protection remains a problem, particularly in the middle of the offensive line. If he stays healthy, Jackson could fill the team's glaring need for a nose tackle who can free the linebackers to plug holes against the run—but that's a big if. Backup DT **Darrell Shropshire** is tough but lacks the strength to hold the point for an entire game. Depth is thin at several positions, particularly defensive end, where top backup **Chauncey Davis** has yet to prove he can consistently get off blocks and make tackles.

**HENRY'S BOTTOM LINE:** Last season, Vick lost his magic touch for taking over games at will, and unless he expands his passing skills he might not recover it. The offense relies too much on the run, and depth is too much of a problem in the secondary and on the offensive and defensive lines for the team to finish with a winning record. —George Henry



with **DT Rod Coleman**

**Hardest hitter:** Got to be Ed Hartwell. He brings that wood. Doesn't matter if it's regular season, preseason. He's going to take your head off if he can.

**Huddle moment:** We've got some damn characters in the huddle, man. From linebackers forgetting the call to just arguing with each other about some earlier play, there's always something crazy going on. You might have snot hanging out of some guy's nose, or someone might crack a joke on a linebacker and say, "Your breath stinks."

**Most wired:** Everybody knows our head coach is wired. He's crazy, you know? And it trickles down to us.

**Unique locker:** Keith Brooking's. I mean Brook used to have pictures of hunting—you know, dead deer—in his locker, but he took 'em down to put up pictures of his baby.

**Cheapest teammate:** Patrick Kerney—he's driving some damn 1980-something Bronco. He had it repainted and the interior redone, and it's still his only car. It's just pitiful.

**Beware of this guy in the locker room:** We've got guys doing stuff all the time. You might be in there getting taped up, and the trainer might pull something on you.

**Can't-miss weekly dining tradition:** On road trips, we gotta get our Popeyes. That's a given right there.

## SNAPSHOT with **LG Jamar Nesbit**

**Can't-miss weekly dining tradition:** O-line dinners. It's just a bonding thing—and it's grown from just O-line to selected invitees. Running backs come; quarterbacks come. You know, they're our guests the first time, maybe our guests the second time, but pretty soon, they're in the rotation. It goes from person to person (who pays). It starts from the youngest and works all the way up.



**Worst ride:** Jamal Jones'. He has a Smurf-blue car. Oh, man. That color is something else. It's like a '94 or '95 Impala or Caprice. The car itself, I'm sure, is fine mechanically. It's just that paint job. It's Smurf-blue, and it's on everything except the wheels.

**Beware of this guy in the locker room:** When Freddie McAfee wants to pull a practical joke, he can get anybody. You just hope he doesn't mess with you.

**Unique locker:** Joe Horn's. It's just clothes all over the place, shoes all over the place. I'm sure it's an organized mess.

**My body on Monday morning:** Equate it to a 65-year-old man with rheumatoid arthritis.

**Funniest trash-talker:** It's a group of people—Fred Thomas, Charles Grant, Jason Craft and Freddie McAfee—and they go at each other. If somebody outside starts laughing, that's when they turn it on somebody else. Those four keep the locker room light.

## STAT PROJECTIONS K Points

1. Neil Rackers	2. Shayne Graham	3. Adam Vinatieri	4. Jay Feely	5. Jason Elam	6. Mike Vanderjagt	7. Lawrence Tynes	8. Jeff Reed
127	128	134	126	121	118	127	117



## WEST

## SCOUTS VIEWS

**SEAHAWKS** Julian Peterson is going to help their defense in a bunch of ways. You can't substitute for his athleticism and his playmaking ability. ... Without **Steve Hutchinson**, you'll probably see less of an emphasis on running strictly to the left side. They'll mix in more runs to the other side. ... A lot of their top guys didn't play in the preseason because of injuries, and they have still performed at a high level. That shows they have a lot of depth. **RAMS** They'll be much improved defensively. They added people at each level—**La'Roi Glover**, **Will Witherspoon** and **Corey Chavous**—who should help them across the board. ... There are very few things I don't like about **Steven Jackson**, other than we have to play against him. He's physical, he can change directions, he can run over you, and he can run around you. ... **Kevin Curtis** is an underrated wideout. If you don't give him the respect he deserves, he can hurt you pretty good.

**CARDINALS** The thing they've lacked has been a solid running game, so **Edgerrin James** is a good part of the puzzle. He can take some pounding, and he'll get the necessary yards to give you the opportunity to control the clock. ... **Adrian Wilson** is one of the more underrated players in the league. He's a physical safety who does a lot of good things in run support, and you have to account for him as a blitzer. ... With the new stadium and ownership going out and spending money on players, the fans are excited. But the bottom line is going to be winning games.

**49ERS** Even with the additions of **Antonio Bryant** and **Vernon Davis**, I don't know right now that you'd be threatened by **Alex Smith**. I think most teams feel

he's got to make some pretty good strides before he's a quarterback who can take over a game and punish your defense. ... If you compared **Derek Smith** to the top linebackers, he'd rank toward the bottom. But he's productive, and he gets everybody lined up.

**Look for Witherspoon to help the Rams do an about-face on defense.**

Predicted finish: 1 Seahawks 12-4\* 2 Rams 7-9 3 Cardinals 6-10 4 49ers 2-14

STARTING LINEUP  
OFFENSE

WR	Darrell Jackson	3
LT	Walter Jones	5
LG	Floyd Womack	2
C	Robbie Tobeck	3
RG	Chris Gray	3
RT	Sean Locklear	3
TE	Itula Mili	2
WR	Nate Burleson	3
QB	Matt Hasselbeck	5
FB	Mack Strong	4
RB	Shaun Alexander	5

## DEFENSE

LE	Bryce Fisher	3
DT	Chuck Darby	3
DT	Rocky Bernard	3
RE	Grant Wistrom	3
OLB	Leroy Hill	3
MLB	Lofa Tatupu	4
OLB	Julian Peterson	4
CB	Kelly Herndon	3
CB	Marcus Trufant	4
SS	Michael Boulware	3
FS	Ken Hamlin	3

## SPECIALISTS

K	Josh Brown	3
P	Ryan Plackemeier	2
KR	Maurice Morris	2
PR	Peter Warrick	2
LS	J.P. Darche	3

Players rated 1-5,  
with 5 highest

Peterson



JAY DROWNS / SN

1 Seattle  
SEAHAWKS

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** The gang's still here. Well, almost. LG **Steve Hutchinson** and WR **Joe Jurevicius** left, but the rest of the offense that led the league in scoring last season is back and has another season of experience in coach **Mike Holmgren's** hybrid of the West Coast scheme. OLB **Julian Peterson's** versatility and athletic ability fit with coordinator **John Marshall's** fast, aggressive, instinctive system. FS **Ken Hamlin** is not only back, he's whirling around the field as if he never suffered life-threatening head injuries outside a nightclub last year. Coming off the best of his three full seasons as the starting quarterback, **Matt Hasselbeck** "gets it," as Holmgren likes to say. Hasselbeck is comfortable in the offense; he makes the right throw, to the right receiver, at the right time, which has allowed him to gain Holmgren's full confidence—almost.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** The Seahawks have improved their depth, but they will open the season without TE **Jerramy Stevens** and had eight players begin training camp on the physically unable to perform list because of offseason surgeries. One of those was WR **Darrell Jackson**, who missed 10 games last season after having knee surgery and missed most of training camp after another procedure on the same knee. Even with the

addition of **Nate Burleson**, Jackson remains the pivotal receiver in the passing game. With Stevens sidelined and backup **Itula Mili** (knee) out at least for the opener, the team is down to No. 3 TE **Will Heller**. Nobody in the league could replace Hutchinson without a drop-off in production. The team will replace him with **Floyd Womack**, but he has had injury problems throughout his career. The return game was bad last season, and it doesn't appear to have improved.

**FARNSWORTH'S BOTTOM LINE:** It will be difficult for the Seahawks to match last season's success, but there is no reason to think they won't win the NFC West for the third straight year. Without Hutchinson, the team might not run as well, but any drop-off on offense could be offset by what Peterson brings to the defense. The pieces are in place for an 11- or 12-win season and another playoff run. —Clare Farnsworth

SNAPSHOT  
with FB Mack Strong

**My body on Monday morning:** Broken glass. It takes me a good 24 hours to pull the pieces back together.

**Beware of this guy in the locker room:**

Tobeck. No question. He's not so much a prankster, but he's the guy who likes to keep stuff going. He's always up to something, and it usually involves Hasselbeck and Grant (Wistrom). Those guys play into it, which only gets Tobeck going even more.

**Worst ride:** I think D.J. Hackett still is driving his car from college. It's a Honda Civic. An old Honda Civic. It's definitely time for an upgrade.

**Player I most hate to play against:** Al Wilson. He's nonstop. He's relentless. We play them this year, and he's a guy where you'd better bring your lunch pail because he's not going to stop until that final gun sounds.

**Hardest hitter:** Chad Brown. He was a guy who would definitely knock the snot out of you. Over and over again. With no regard for your body or his. He'd just try to hurt people.

**Can't-miss weekly dining tradition:** Our Saturday night meals (at the team hotel). I love those. I go for the spaghetti and fried chicken and then top it off with a hot fudge sundae.



MATTHEW KUTZ / SN



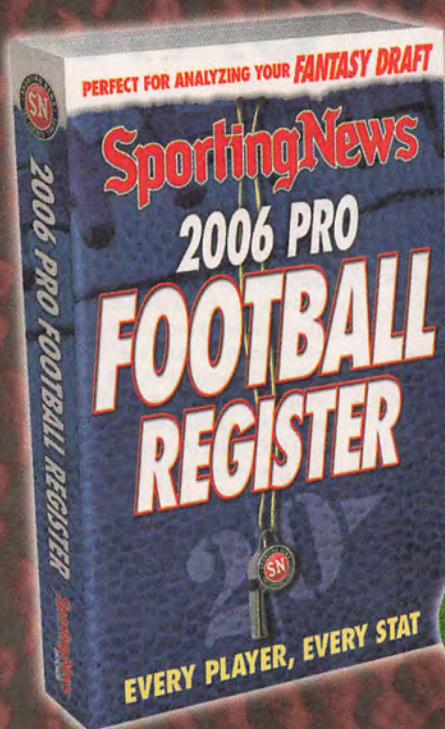
## STAT PROJECTIONS K Points

FS	9. Josh Brown	10. Matt Stover	11. Jeff Wilkins	12. David Akers	13. Nate Kaeding	14. Ryan Longwell	15. John Kasay	16. S. Janikowski
	117	116	110	104	118	102	109	101

\*projected playoff team



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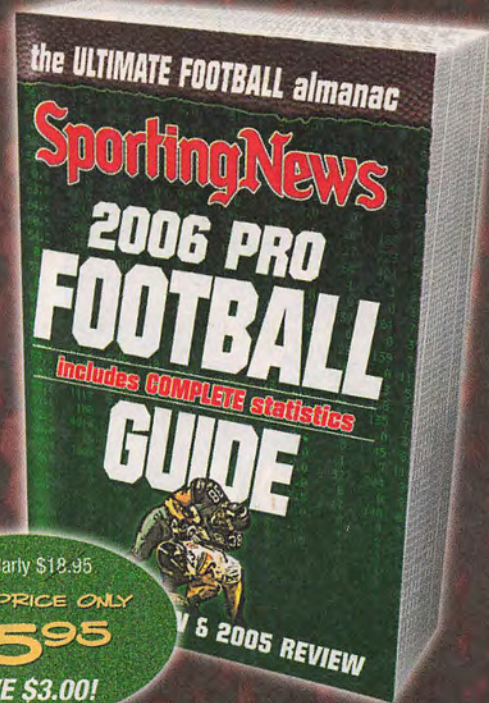
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STARTING LINEUP  
OFFENSE

WR	Isaac Bruce	3
LT	Orlando Pace	5
LG	Richie Incognito	2
C	Andy McCollum	3
RG	Adam Timmerman	3
RT	Alex Barron	3
TE	Joe Klopfenstein	2
WR	Torry Holt	5
QB	Marc Bulger	4
FB	Paul Smith	2
RB	Steven Jackson	3

## DEFENSE

LE	Leonard Little	4
DT	La'Roi Glover	4
DT	Jimmy Kennedy	3
RE	Anthony Hargrove	3
OLB	Brandon Chillar	2
MLB	Will Witherspoon	4
OLB	Pisa Tinoisamoa	4
CB	Travis Fisher	3
CB	Fakhir Brown	3
SS	Corey Chavous	4
FS	O.J. Atogwe	2

## SPECIALISTS

K	Jeff Wilkins	5
P	Matt Turk	4
KR	Kevin Curtis	2
PR	Shaun McDonald	2
LS	Chris Massey	5

Players rated 1-5,  
with 5 highest

defense is respectable, the Rams have enough firepower at the skill positions to contend for a wild-card berth. —Jim Thomas

2 St. Louis  
RAMS

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** New coach **Scott Linehan** has provided a return to normalcy after a tumultuous 2005 season. The focus is back on the field, not on feuding between the football staff and the front office. New defensive coordinator **Jim Haslett** has instilled a new attitude. This unit will tackle better, compete better and play with more attitude. At the least, it will go from 30th in the league last season to the middle of the pack. DT **La'Roi Glover**, MLB **Will Witherspoon** and SS **Corey Chavous**—all free-agent pickups—bring talent, playmaking ability and much-needed leadership. On the offensive line, LG **Richie Incognito** doesn't appear too rusty after a two-year layoff; C **Andy McCollum** and RG **Adam Timmerman** are healthy after recent years marred by offseason surgeries, and **Todd Steussie** gives the team its best No. 3 tackle in years.

**REASONS FOR CONCERN:** Two rookies, **Joe Klopfenstein** and **Dominique Byrd**, will be asked to play prominent roles at tight end, a key position in Linehan's offense. Klopfenstein has some pass-catching skills but is on the slender side and is a work in progress as a blocker. Byrd has more ability as a pass catcher but is even more of a liability as a blocker. As a result, he has fallen behind 49ers castoff **Aaron Walker** on the depth chart. **Marshall Faulk**'s unofficial retirement left the team scrambling for help in the backfield. Backup RBs **Tony Fisher** and **Moe Williams** are hard-nosed runners, but neither has the speed to be a change-of-pace complement to RB **Steven Jackson**. There will be pressure on Jackson to stay healthy for 16 games, something he didn't do in his first two seasons. Despite the defensive additions, questions remain about whether the Rams will be able to stop the run consistently. P **Matt Turk** is an upgrade, but the special teams haven't shown much improvement otherwise.

## THOMAS' BOTTOM

**LINE:** The Rams are improved but will face a tougher schedule, so it's no certainty they will improve much on last year's 6-10 record. Still, if the

SNAPSHOT  
with RE Anthony Hargrove

**Funniest trash-talker:** Jimmy Kennedy because he always talks about people's looks. If he's playing across from a guy who's really ugly, that's all you'll hear about all day. We were playing Philadelphia, and he called some guy "a big, black Smurf." It was a great call.

**Most wired:** Our special teams coach, Bob Ligashesky. Liggy's the most hyper coach I've ever seen. There are a couple stairs at the front of our team auditorium, and I always count how many times he goes up and down them during our special teams meetings. We say he's getting his StairMaster workout. He has to do about 100 stairs during the meeting.

**Player I most hate to play against:** Leonard Davis. He's got those big "uncle" hands—the kind of hands that when you're in trouble, your uncle or your dad just kind of hits you. When (Davis) puts them on you, it's like, "Is that my dad who just hit me?"

**Can't-miss weekly dining tradition:** Me and my baby (his fiancée) like fast-food stuff. We love Steak 'n Shake. Her and I eat grilled cheese and chili there. That's our thing.

**Nobody knows this about the Edward Jones Dome:** We have the worst coming-out music ever. Any time you have to warm up to something like "Don't You Wish Your Girlfriend Was Hot Like Me?" that's bad.

3 Arizona  
CARDINALS

**REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:** Edgerrin James gives the club the elite running back it had been missing for years, and a better running game will fix a lot of problems. Last season, the team had no trouble moving the ball between the 20s, but it ranked 30th in red zone touchdowns. James has let the offensive line know he has big goals and won't accept a repeat performance of last season, when the team was last in the league in rushing. James also has brought a looser atmosphere to the locker room. QB **Kurt Warner** now is comfortable with the scheme, and he'll have greater freedom to call audibles, which only can help an offense that struggled last year. The defense improved greatly in the final two months last season and is a good bet to sustain that performance. Every home game is sold out at the new stadium, which gives the team a

home-field advantage it never has had in Arizona.

## REASONS FOR

**CONCERN:** It's too early to say whether the offensive line has improved since last season. The team made only one change to the unit, signing free-agent RG **Milford Brown**. It's counting on the return of a handful of players from injuries, including LG **Reggie Wells**, C **Alex Stepanovich** and RT **Oliver Ross**. But none of those three has proved he can play at an elite level. There is a lack of depth at almost every position except defensive tackle. Coach **Dennis Green** says the first-team offense will be able to score, but it's fragile. Warner, 35, is prone to injury. If he gets hurt, the club likely will turn to rookie QB **Matt Leinart**, who looked good in camp. On defense, there is little depth at linebacker or cornerback. OLB **Karlos Dansby** hasn't practiced this preseason because of a sore left big toe and won't play in the first few games. Green was counting on Dansby to be

STARTING LINEUP  
OFFENSE

WR	Larry Fitzgerald	5
LT	Leonard Davis	3
LG	Reggie Wells	3
C	Alex Stepanovich	2
RG	Milford Brown	2
RT	Oliver Ross	2
TE	Eric Edwards	2
WR	Anquan Boldin	5
WR	Bryant Johnson	2
QB	Kurt Warner	3
RB	Edgerrin James	5

## DEFENSE

LE	Chike Okefor	3
DT	Darnell Dockett	3
DT	Kendrick Clancy	3
RE	Bertrand Berry	5
OLB	Calvin Pace	2
MLB	Gerald Hayes	2
OLB	Orlando Huff	2
CB	Antrel Rolle	4
CB	David Macklin	3
SS	Adrian Wilson	5
FS	Robert Griffith	3

## SPECIALISTS

K	Neil Rackers	5
P	Scott Player	4
KR	J.J. Arrington	2
PR	Troy Walters	3
LS	Nathan Hodel	4

Players rated 1-5,  
with 5 highest

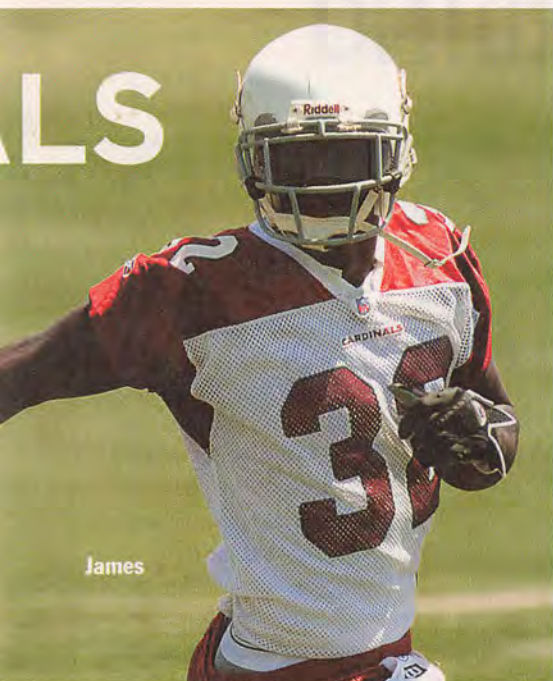


ALBERT DICKSON / SN

## STAT PROJECTIONS DEFENSE Points per game • Takeaways • D/ST Yds

FS	1. Bears	2. Steelers	3. Panthers	4. Buccaneers	5. Colts	6. Seahawks	7. Patriots	8. Ravens
	14.2 • 33 • 5	16.8 • 31 • 3	17.9 • 38 • 4	17.4 • 28 • 3	17.6 • 32 • 3	19.1 • 30 • 4	18.8 • 29 • 4	18.4 • 32 • 5





James

a key playmaker, but there is no guarantee Dansby will replace **Orlando Huff** on the weak side when he returns. **SOMERS' BOTTOM LINE:** The Cardinals will be better. There is enough talent in the starting lineup for this team to hover around .500 most of the year, but an injury or two could send the club spiraling downward. —Kent Somers



## SNAPSHOT with SS **Adrian Wilson**

**Cheapest teammate:** Robert Tate, without a doubt. He goes and picks up things because they have the after-Thanksgiving sale. He'll buy TVs and try to sell them for the whole price so he can make a profit.

**Funniest trash-talker:** Right now, I'd have to say Edge (Edgerrin James). He's always talking. On every running play, he thinks he got a first down.

**Most wired coach:** Kirby Wilson, our running backs coach. He gets hyped for practice. Game day comes around, he's hopping around everywhere.

**Worst ride:** James Darling's white Taurus. It's notorious for breaking down.

**Huddle moment:** We were playing Dallas last year, and Bert (Bertrand Berry) said, "Watch me go out here and get this sack." We had just come from a timeout. And I'll be damned if he didn't go get a sack the next play.

**Road trip I like most:** Atlanta. There is a lot of shopping, a lot of things to do.

**Weirdest pregame ritual:** I rode with Bertrand Berry one day to a game, and he was listening to slow music. And then he was listening to real slow music in the locker room. I don't know how that gets you hyped.

# 4 San Francisco 49ERS

## STARTING LINEUP

### OFFENSE

WR	Arnaz Battle	2
LT	Jonas Jennings	3
LG	Larry Allen	4
C	Eric Heitmann	3
RG	Justin Smiley	3
RT	Kwame Harris	2
TE	Vernon Davis	2
WR	Antonio Bryant	4
QB	Alex Smith	2
FB	Chris Hetherington	3
RB	Frank Gore	3

### DEFENSE

LE	Bryant Young	4
NT	Anthony Adams	3
RE	Marques Douglas	2
OLB	Manny Lawson	2
ILB	Derek Smith	4
ILB	Jeff Ulbrich	4
OLB	Brandon Moore	2
CB	Shawntae Spencer	3
CB	Walt Harris	3
SS	Tony Parrish	3
FS	Mike Adams	2

### SPECIALISTS

K	Joe Nedney	4
P	Andy Lee	2
KR	Maurice Hicks	2
PR	Brandon Williams	3
LS	Brian Jennings	4

Players rated 1-5,  
with 5 highest

## REASONS FOR OPTIMISM:

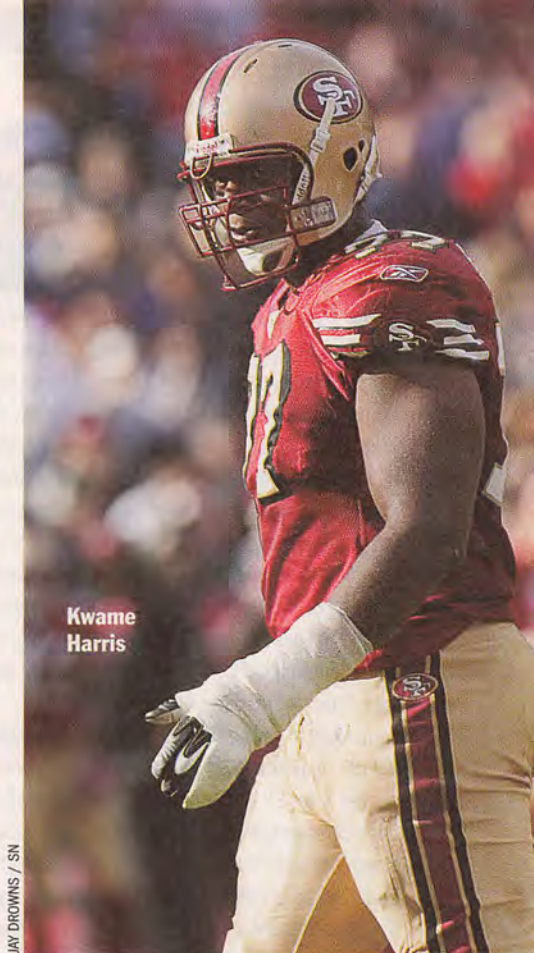
The offensive line has been transformed from a weakness to a strength. G **Larry Allen** and T **Jonas Jennings** form a solid left side. RG **Justin Smiley** and RT **Kwame Harris** have made significant strides in pass blocking. QB **Alex Smith** appears to have absorbed valuable lessons from his rocky rookie season. He is more sure of himself in the pocket and is making better decisions. Newcomer WR **Antonio Bryant** brings a big-play presence.

TEs **Eric Johnson** and **Vernon Davis** give Smith additional options, especially on third downs. RB **Frank Gore** is explosive and can take pressure off the passing game.

## REASONS FOR CONCERN:

The 49ers are struggling to establish a strong, cohesive pass rush, primarily because they're having problems replacing OLBs **Julian Peterson** and **Andre Carter**. Rookie **Manny Lawson**, who replaces Peterson, has been solid in run support and has flashed speed as a pass rusher but needs to develop more punch and explosiveness. Lawson also needs to counter tackles who try to neutralize him by riding him outside. **Brandon Moore**, Carter's replacement, has been pressuring the quarterback but needs to finish with sacks more consistently. With the trade of RB **Kevan Barlow**, Gore becomes the feature back, but he has had knee and shoulder problems throughout his career. The 49ers gave up more yards passing than any team last season, and their secondary again appears vulnerable. CB **Walt Harris**, signed as a free agent, brings valuable experience, but CB **Shawntae Spencer** needs to be more consistent in coverage. FS **Mike Adams** must take fewer risks. Smith has made progress, but he still struggles when he's under duress. He needs to go with the quicker, safer reads.

**GEORGATOS' BOTTOM LINE:** The 49ers had too many problems to rectify in one offseason. Though they have gone to some length to upgrade the supporting cast for Smith, gaping holes remain, especially on defense. —Dennis Georgatos



Kwame Harris

JAY DROWNS / SN



## SNAPSHOT with NT **Anthony Adams**

**Weirdest pregame ritual:** Jeff Ulbrich's. He always wrestles with the equipment guy. When he puts on his shoulder pads, they wrestle. They try to see who can knock each other back the farthest. I think Ulbrich lost one time, and everybody went crazy.

**Unique locker:** Kevan Barlow's before he was traded. It was filled with house shoes, regular shoes, teddy bears, footballs, candy, pictures. You name it. It was like a miniature condo or something. It might have had a microwave in it. You never know.

**Cheapest teammate:** It would have to be Mike Adams. He is tight. I took him to get an iPod, and he was trying to get a deal. I was like, "That's how much they cost." He's like, "Are you sure? They're not trying to get me or anything?" Mike still talked to the guy for at least 20 minutes before he actually bought it.

**Bet you didn't know this about Mike Nolan:** He works out like he's still playing. He leaves here just drenched in sweat. I was leaving meetings the other night and saw him hanging upside down off the pull-up bar. He put some things around his ankles with hooks on them. I don't know if he was doing sit-ups or if he was just hanging and stretching his back out. But he gets on that treadmill, man, and he just runs.



9. Jaguars  
18.2 • 28 • 2

10. Giants  
21.1 • 32 • 3

11. Chargers  
19.4 • 24 • 1

12. Cowboys  
18.9 • 25 • 1

13. Redskins  
19.1 • 28 • 4

14. Dolphins  
19.7 • 28 • 1

15. Eagles  
20.2 • 27 • 2

16. Falcons  
21.7 • 31 • 3



# BASEBALL

## INSIDER MIKE BERARDINO



**Rocco Baldelli** again is a standout center fielder for the Devil Rays after missing last season because of major elbow and knee surgeries, but baseball failed to name him as one of its six finalists for American League Comeback Player of the Year. "It doesn't really bother me," Baldelli says. "If it was Most Difficult Comeback of the Year, hopefully I'd get that award. But there's no award for that. You can basically have a bad year and be Comeback Player of the Year." Baldelli's hamstrings still bother him; they even held him out of the first two months this season. But with each passing week, he looks more like the player the Devil Rays wisely locked up last offseason for as long as six years. "It's really a testament to him," Devil Rays G.M. **Andrew Friedman** says. "The fact he had 18 months off and is continuing to get better is nothing short of amazing. His ceiling is limitless." ➤ Indians 3B **Andy Marte** started 4-for-38 (.105) after his late-July promotion from Class AAA, but he slowly is settling in. "You see him starting to walk more; that means he's seeing the ball a little bit better," Indians hitting coach **Derek Shelton** says. "I think the biggest thing at the plate is the way he carries himself. He handles himself in the box like a good hitter, and I think that's huge." ➤ There are two **Tony Penas** playing in the majors these days, but the better one isn't the son of the Yankees coach with the same name. Pena the Diamondbacks reliever had a mostly rough August but recently picked up his first save with the promise of more to come. "He's legitimate," a rival scout says. "He's made an amazing improvement from when I saw him in the past. Now it's a pretty easy, powerful 95 mph with good off-speed stuff and good command." ➤ The same scout



Baldelli

BOB LEVERONE / SN

says he doesn't expect fellow Arizona reliever RHP **Jose Valverde** to emerge from his mysterious funk anytime soon. "He always had an unorthodox delivery and arm action," the scout says. "The one thing he always had going for him was he never was afraid of contact. He had supreme confidence in his pitches. It looks like someone might have tinkered with him to improve his off-speed stuff, and as a result

he lost some of his movement and his confidence." ➤ Brewers RHP **Tomo Ohka**—batting lefthanded for the first time in his career against Colorado—recently became the fifth pitcher this season to drive in four runs in one game.

That's two more RBIs than Rockies backup C **Danny Ardoin** had through 109 at-bats. ➤ Rangers LF **Carlos Lee** changed his mind and went back to his former agents—**Tom Reich**, **Adam Katz** and **Craig Landis**—after previously dropping them for **Scott Boras**. Tigers SS **Carlos Guillen**, though, recently signed with Boras. Maybe that's because the Tigers clubhouse includes Boras clients LHP **Kenny Rogers**, C **Ivan Rodriguez** and RF **Magglio Ordonez** working under contracts that guarantee them a combined \$131 million. Guillen won't be a free agent until after next season, and now it's less likely he'll sign an extension without testing the market.

### speedreads

A player should be required to have spent a significant chunk (40 games?) of his previous season on the D.L. to even be considered for Comeback Player of the Year.

The Red Sox might not have the resources or the inclination to build an "uberteam," as Theo Epstein says, but they owe it to their rabid fan base to emphasize the present whenever possible.

Nice to see Jamie Moyer, as Greg Maddux did before him, jump into a pennant race as his career winds down.

### BLOG ALERT

I think I'm going to take some athletic tape and tape my MP3 player to my sunglasses.

The minor league season is ending, but Garrett Broshuis still is getting into sticky situations. Check out his blog at [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com).



Milledge

The Mets were left to deal with fading (and expensive) OF **Shawn Green** because their gamble on OF **Lastings Milledge** didn't pay off in the short term. Milledge, who might have brought LHP **Barry Zito** or RHP **Roy Oswalt** in return two months ago, was farmed out. He hit just .163 from the seventh inning on while in the majors. "I couldn't believe they didn't trade him," a rival official says. "You're the Mets. You're going for it. And you've got this really hot prospect whose value might never be higher. It's not like they're built for the future."



## THE CLOSER Todd Jones

### The Tigers seek what the Yankees have: patience at the plate

Most players sympathized with the Yankees and Red Sox for having to play that five-games-in-four-days series. No way MLB should have allowed TV to dictate that kind of schedule: day-night doubleheader on Friday, day game Saturday, night game Sunday, day game Monday, followed by trips to the West Coast with games there on Tuesday. Wow. No one should have to do that, not even the Evil Empire.

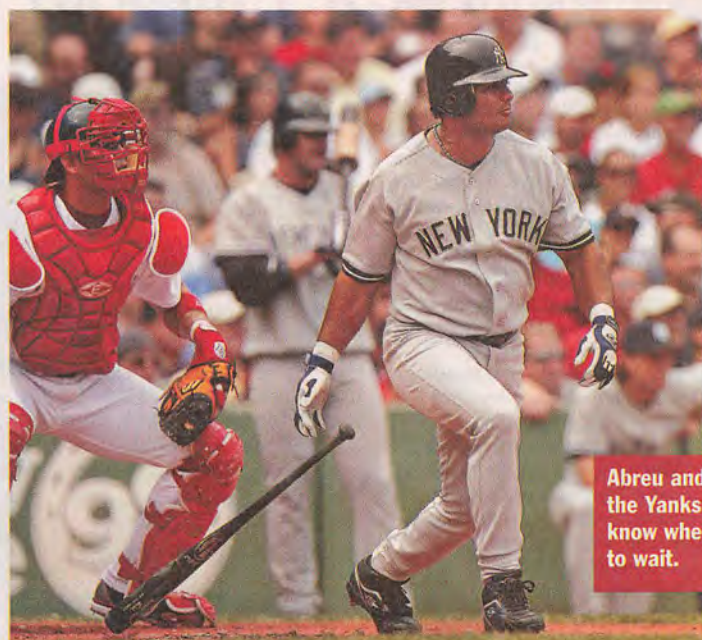
But watching the games was an eye-opening experience. Yankees hitters found a way to grind out every at-bat. By that, I mean they worked the counts, got themselves in hitters counts and patiently dropped 49 runs—and a sweep—on Red Sox Nation.

I heard Yankees hitting coach Don Mattingly say in an interview that he tells his guys not to look for walks but to wait for pitches in their slots and drive them. So what happens against the Red

Sox? Bobby Abreu sees about 125 pitches in the series.

Pitchers like me are always trying to make hitters put the ball in play as early in counts as we can. When playing the Yankees—as well as the Red Sox and all good-hitting teams—you want to stay away from hitters counts—2-0, 3-1, 3-2, 2-2. Give those counts to the Yankees and you're in for a long day. Also, when your counts get long, the games get long. Game 2 of the Yanks-Sox doubleheader set the major league record for longest 9-inning game (4 hours, 45 minutes). That kind of pace puts your defense to sleep and can result in someone getting a ball hit down his throat because he wasn't totally ready.

Contrast that to the Tigers. We have a weakness that sometimes is our strength: We love to swing. We're aggressive, and, as a result, we swing at a lot of borderline pitches. Against teams with bad pitching, that's OK because they



Abreu and the Yanks know when to wait.

WINSLOW TOWNSEND / AP

make mistakes over the middle of the plate. But it's a problem against teams that know how to expand hitters' strike zones.

Last week, before we played a big series against the White Sox, our manager, Jim Leyland, walked into our hitters meeting, mentioned Mattingly and said he'd like to see our team take a more discreet approach against good pitchers. It's funny: Everything Leyland has said this

year has turned to gold. Our hitters listened, and we got quality at-bats and good results.

When you think about it, a hitter can do only what the pitcher will let him. When a hitter recognizes that and takes advantage of it, he is successful. But that's the struggle of hitting in the big leagues.

Todd Jones is a Tigers reliever. E-mail him at [tjones@sportingnews.com](mailto:tjones@sportingnews.com).

■ Everyone is pumped about this series—well, everyone except Reds G.M. Wayne Krivsky, who has dreaded this day because, with the August 31 waiver trading deadline passed, he no longer can turn over his bullpen every four days.

■ The Pirates dusted off the brooms in mid-August, holding St. Louis to three runs in three games. Being shut down by Zach Duke, Ian Snell and Paul Maholm is only slightly more embarrassing than being dunked on by **David Eckstein**.



MATTHEW KUTZ / SN

■ There are future Hall of Fame pitchers galore in this series with Pedro Martinez, Roger Clemens and Tom Glavine, not to mention a minireunion of the Yankees' 2004 rotation with Clemens, Orlando Hernandez and Andy Pettitte. Plus, Carlos Beltran returns to the place that made him a fortune. Yet the only thing people want to talk about is how **Phil Garner** is able to fake that German accent when filming those "Dr. Z" car commercials.



GENE J. PUSKAR / AP

## Dream week

August 31-September 6

**THURSDAY, 8/31**  
Royals at Twins

**FRIDAY, 9/1**  
Reds at Padres

**SATURDAY, 9/2**  
Pirates at Cardinals

**SUNDAY, 9/3**  
Mets at Astros

**MONDAY, 9/4**  
White Sox at Red Sox

**TUESDAY, 9/5**  
Rangers at Athletics

**WEDNESDAY, 9/6**  
Indians at Blue Jays

■ Kansas City recently played the role of prom-night zit to a pair of contenders; the Royals swept a three-game series against Boston and a doubleheader against Oakland. The Twins, however, popped the Royals in early August, outscoring them, 41-15, in a four-game sweep.



■ Their division title hopes dashed, both teams are gunning for the wild card. The day before the All-Star break, Chicago won a 19-inning marathon between the Sox. The game lasted so long, Chicago manager **Ozzie Guillen** ran out of expletives.

■ Both teams are fighting with the Angels for A.L. West supremacy—literally. The A's and Rangers both have had benches-clearing incidents with L.A. this season. Oakland leads the division, but the Angels are well ahead in suspensions and sissy slaps.

■ Hearing that the Indians have several players "fighting" for full-time jobs in 2007, Blue Jays manager John Gibbons rips off his shirt, screams something about being badder than William Wallace and challenges any Cleveland player to a steel cage match. Apparently, he has run out of Blue Jays to bait into brawls. —Chris Bahr



In the 20 games since he has returned from the D.L., **YANKEES** 2B **Robinson Cano** nearly has equaled his power numbers from the season's first 69 games. Cano attributes his increased production to the hitting work he did while his hamstring healed. He focused on hitting to all fields.

... After looking overmatched at the plate in mid-August, **MARINERS** CF **Adam Jones** was optioned to Class AAA Tacoma. **Ichiro Suzuki** will get most of the starts in center field, and **Chris Snelling** will get an extended look in right. ... LHP **Francisco Liriano** (elbow) could be back with the **TWINS** by mid-September, though possibly not as a starter. The club will consider using him out of the bullpen for the rest of this season so it doesn't jeopardize his recovery. ... RHP **Amblorix Burgos** still is touted as the **ROYALS'** closer of the future, but RHP **Joe Nelson** is doing well in his first shot at the job. He converted his first three save opportunities.

... Opposing pitchers have learned how to attack **ANGELS** rookie C **Mike Napoli** since his hot start. As a result, he has been struggling at the plate, which has created more opportunities for **Jose Molina**. The two will split the starting job down the stretch. ...

**WHITE SOX** RHP **Freddy Garcia** seems to be getting stronger as the season winds down. His velocity consistently was in the low 90s during a recent start against the **Tigers**; before that, he typically had been throwing his fastball in the



JOHN CORDAS FOR SN

## Staying CENTERED

Though **Chone Figgins** has made a habit of playing multiple positions, most of his starts this season have come in center field, where he has begun to improve. Figgins has worked with LF **Garret Anderson** on routes and judging fly balls and low line drives.

**Cano did more than rest while he was on the disabled list.**

mid- to upper 80s. ... C **Javy Lopez**'s bat has been slower and less productive than the **RED SOX** hoped when they acquired him, and his defense has been as deficient as they had feared. His ineffectiveness has made **Jason Varitek**'s looming return even more vital. ... The **RANGERS** are considering calling up LHP **John Danks**, who could be used as a setup reliever if the team stays in the playoff race. Danks' best pitch is his changeup, but he needs to work on commanding his fastball. ... **TIGERS** LHP **Kenny Rogers**' reputation for second half struggles has obscured the reason for his problems this time around: too much energy. He believes he has been throwing his off-speed pitches so hard that their velocity hasn't differed enough from that of his fastball. ... The **ORIOLES** recently

called up RHP **Jim Hoey**, a hard-throwing reliever with inconsistent breaking stuff. He missed most of the past two years because of an elbow injury but rocketed through the organization this season. ... IF **Kevin Witt** caught the **DEVIL RAYS'** eye with his solid bat and earned a call-up. The lefthanded-hitting slugger has shown plenty of power; he led Class AAA Durham in home runs and RBIs before his promotion. ... **INDIANS** rookie OF **Franklin Gutierrez** proved he could play exceptional defense, but because his bat lacked pop, he was sent to Class AAA Buffalo last week. It's questionable whether he'll land a reserve job with the club next year. ... If rookie RHP **Shaun Marcum** continues to struggle, one of three righthanders—**Josh Towers**, **Casey Janssen** or **Ty Taubenheim**—could be plugged into the **BLUE JAYS'** No. 5 starter role. All three are likely to be called up when rosters expand. ... **Kurt Suzuki** is probably a couple of



CHRIS CARLSON / AP

## One up, one down

Middle infielder **Dustin Pedroia** got an early call-up when Red Sox SS **Alex Gonzalez** (oblique) landed on the D.L. Pedroia's range and arm strength are concerns, but he makes solid contact at the plate. As for Gonzalez, the club loves his defense but may be wary of re-signing a player who could be on the decline physically.

years from a regular big-league job, but he seems to have passed **Jeremy Brown** as the **ATHLETICS'** catcher of the future. Suzuki, 22, has impressed the team with his defensive skills.

## FOCUS: Hot prospects

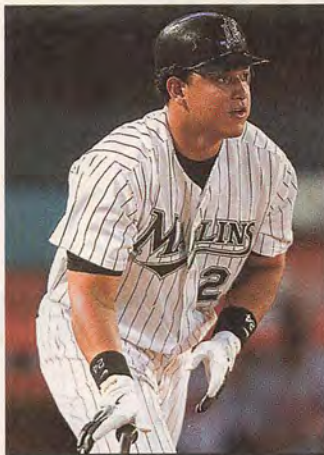
The Blue Jays' **Adam Lind**, 23, has a smooth lefthanded swing that enables him to hit for contact and power. Lind, a potential September call-up, is projected to play left field in the majors, but DH isn't out of the question. ... LHP **Andrew Miller**, 21, must hone his changeup to be a solid major league starter, but he may be ready to be an effective reliever for the **Tigers** in September, especially against lefthanded hitters. ... Now that a nagging wrist injury has healed, White Sox OF **Ryan Sweeney**, 21, has rediscovered his power while continuing to hit for average. He'll be promoted after Class AAA Charlotte is out of the International League playoffs.



The **DODGERS** (IF/OF **Julio Lugo**), **GIANTS** (1B/3B **Shea Hillenbrand**) and **ROCKIES** (SS/2B **Kazuo Matsui**) are using newcomers to help keep their regulars fresh. Dodgers manager **Grady Little** wants to play the versatile Lugo as much as possible; he likes Lugo's energy. Hillenbrand at times has spelled 3B **Pedro Feliz**, who wore down in July. Matsui can give slumping SS **Clint Barmes** a breather and allow Barmes to work on his swing. ...

**ASTROS** CF **Willy Taveras**' baserunning has improved markedly since May. Taveras appears more confident, and after moving from second to first in the order he now has a green light to steal. ... With **David Eckstein** (oblique) on the D.L., the **CARDINALS**' options at shortstop are fairly simple: **Aaron Miles** and newly signed **Jose Vizcaino**. The club has more choices to replace Eckstein as the leadoff hitter. Miles, Vizcaino and 2B **Ronnie Belliard** already have batted first. ... With RHP **Chan Ho Park** (intestinal surgery) likely out for the season, RHP **Mike Thompson** will get a chance to audition for the **PADRES**' 2007 rotation. Because the team is battling for a playoff spot, it will find out plenty about Thompson, who has impressed the Padres so far with his ability to throw strikes. ...

**REDS** RHP **Aaron Harang** studied videotape and consulted with coaches **Vern Ruhle**, **Tom Hume** and **Lee Tunnell** about his mechanics. All three noticed that



BOB LEVERONE / SN

## If it ain't broke ...

Marlins 3B **Miguel Cabrera** does not waver from his disciplined approach at the plate. He is focused on hitting the ball up the middle and to the opposite field.

Cabrera, 23, isn't willing to sacrifice average to hit more home runs—he remains a gap-to-gap hitter.



KATHY WILLENS / AP

The Mets don't think Green's bat is dead wood.

## FOCUS: Hot prospects

The question about Rockies SS **Troy Tulowitzki** is when, not if, he'll get to the big leagues. Colorado's top draft pick in 2005 has one of the strongest arms in the minors. Tulowitzki, 21, is batting .294 with 13 home runs for Class AA Tulsa. ... Pirates OF **Andrew McCutchen**, 19, might reach the majors next year. Pittsburgh's No. 1 pick in 2005 already is at Class AA Altoona. He is a five-tool talent. ... Brewers RHP **Yovani Gallardo**, 20, could bid for a big-league job in 2007. He's part of a talented staff at Class AA Huntsville. Gallardo's fastball touches 94 mph, and he has a biting changeup.

Harang's front side was flying open, which was causing his elbow to drop and his pitches to rise. ... When **DIAMONDBACKS** RHP **Brandon Webb**'s arm comes back during his delivery, his hand needs to be roughly in line with second base; it has been pointing more toward first base of late. That affects the movement on his power sinker. ... Newly acquired RF **Shawn Green** fills the **METS**' need for an offense-minded outfielder. The club likes how Green works the count and hits to the opposite field. Green is a better extra-base threat than **Endy Chavez**, who returns to his primary role as the fourth outfielder. ... The **PHILLIES** bolstered their bench by acquiring **Jeff Conine** from the Orioles. Conine is a solid righthanded hitter who can play left field, right field, first base and third base. ... **CUBS** 1B **Derrek Lee** says his surgically repaired wrist feels strong. He's expected to return soon. ... The **NATIONALS** are trying to turn RF **Austin**

**Kearns**, a fly-ball hitter, into a line-drive hitter now that he's playing his home games in spacious RFK Stadium. ... With CF **Chris Duffy** playing every day for the **PIRATES**, OF **Rajai Davis** is limited to pinch hitting and pinch running. If Duffy falters in September, however, Davis could challenge Duffy next spring. ... **BREWERS** manager **Ned Yost** wants outfield coach **Dave Nelson** to break OFs **Gabe Gross** and **Layne Nix** of their habit of "drifting" to fly balls rather than sprinting into position. The process has been difficult. ... **MARLINS** utilityman **Alfredo Amezaga** is a natural second baseman but has played mostly in center field in the second half of the season. He plans to sharpen his middle infield skills in the Mexican winter league. ... Expect RHP **Kyle Davies** (groin) to solidify the **BRAVES**' rotation in September after he comes off the disabled list. Davies draws comparisons to Dodgers RHP **Greg Maddux** because of his cerebral approach.

## FS FantasySource

The 2007 fantasy potential of three promising young hitters:

**Nick Markakis, OF, Orioles.**

He has enough power and plate discipline to hit 20-25 home runs and maintain a .300 average. Markakis, a lefthanded batter, has had no problems against lefthanded pitching in his rookie season; he was batting .308 at the start of the week.

**Lastings Milledge, OF, Mets.**

Milledge made a splash when he came up in June. Since then, he has posted a low average and few steals. Eventually he'll be a stud; it's uncertain whether that will happen next season.

**Ryan Shealy, 1B, Royals.** His

trade from Colorado to Kansas City will assure him playing time, but the lineup around him won't be strong. His minor league stats suggest he could someday hit 30 home runs in the bigs, which is what fantasy leaguers need from their first basemen. —George Winkler

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BOB LEVERONE / SN



INSIDER **MATT HAYES**

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Rocky Top, we'll know and see, just how good you can be ...

# The beginning of Fulmer's unhappy ending

It's only one game, right? Forget that. It's the season.

"We're starting to figure out what kind of team we're going to be," Tennessee quarterback Erik Ainge says.

They'll have no question after this weekend.

Say what you want about the Vols' meltdown last season. Blame it on coaches or players or karma, but understand this: The season opener against championship-caliber California will define this season—and coach Phil Fulmer's shaky future at his alma mater.

Win and the road to redemption suddenly is smoother. Lose and ...

"I don't think about things like that," Fulmer says. "My job is to get this team playing like it should."

And therein lies the problem. Tennessee hasn't played to its potential in years—since a gutty, opportunistic team won the national title in 1998. In the seven seasons since, off-field problems and incidents of on-field underachievement have outnumbered championships by, say, 2,000 to 0.

If it were just the first loss to Vanderbilt in 23 years or the first losing season in 17 years or yet another loss to Steve Spurrier, last year's 5-6 finish would be a hiccup for a guy who has done too much to be pushed out the door for one



**Throw all the water bottles you want, Phil. It won't help.**

bad season. But for the first time in the history of coaching (sarcasm, everyone), it's not all about wins and losses.

It's about the personality of a team, a program and its leader. Tennessee's problems aren't about X's and O's—although the rehiring of assistant David Cutcliffe will energize the offense—they're about the Jimmys and Joes and their inability to stay off the police blotter.

Problems off the field eventually filter their way onto it. Before last season, during an offseason in which eight players

were arrested or cited, Fulmer publicly ripped his team for spending more time in Central Booking than Central American studies. Then came the 5-6 disaster, and after another arrest and incident this spring Fulmer went ballistic and threw water bottles in a team meeting.

Three months later, three more players had been arrested. Look, every team goes through problems with wayward players. The difference is, Fulmer twice warned his team—and each time the warning failed to sink in.

That is the sign of a coach

losing his team.

Fulmer has made surface changes; you know, the kind that appease fat-cat boosters, high-level administrators and message board nuts. He fired two assistant coaches and pushed out a third. He even brought back Cutcliffe to run the offense and, more important, to instill some semblance of discipline and order.

Everything, they say, is big and orange and beautiful again. "We've grown a lot from last season," tackle Arron Sears says. "We've changed as a team, our mentality, our focus."

Don't bet on it. This team hasn't dealt with adversity yet. The Vols are one bad game against one good team from this season looking a lot like 2005. That team, Cal, and that game are days away.

This weekend is the season for Tennessee. The confidence and emotion that would come from a victory over an elite nonconference opponent could be enough to change the course of a team and a coach headed for a divorce.

That, or the dejection and deflation of loss could morph into the undoing of Fulmer and the Vols.

"I've always looked at myself by nature as an optimist," Fulmer says. "But I'm also certainly a realist."

The reality is, the meter started ticking long ago. **SN**



presents

**HAYES' 6-PACK**

**Florida State 21, Miami 20**

I'm still not convinced Miami quarterback Kyle Wright can carry his team in a big game.

**USC 35, Arkansas 13**

Southern California scores half of what it did on Arkie last year. So the Hogs have that going for them.

**California 24, Tennessee 14**

The Bears' defense—not coach Jeff Tedford's celebrated offense—will control this game.

**Auburn 31, Washington St. 10**

This is Auburn's toughest nonconference game? I don't want to say 2004, but ...

**Notre Dame 21, Georgia Tech 19**

The Irish will sputter for three quarters before Brady Quinn leads a late comeback.

**Ohio State 30, N. Illinois 9**

The goal here: Get a lead early, then rest the starters (for Texas) in the second half.



## More decisive debuts

Five teams besides Tennessee that need victories in season openers:

**Notre Dame (at Georgia Tech).** Give Tech defensive coordinator Jon Tenuta eight months to scheme someone, and ... you know how the rest goes. Tenuta knows his stuff, and Tech has the speed and athletes on defense to give the Irish fits.

**UCLA (vs. Utah).** This isn't your typical non-BCS cupcake: Utah has more talent and ability than 40 percent of BCS teams. Still, a loss to the Utes will put a serious crimp in UCLA coach Karl Dorrell's rebuilding project—if on perception alone.

**South Carolina (at Mississippi State).** The Gamecocks proved in last year's Independence Bowl that they haven't learned how to deal with success. An upset here would damage South Carolina's SEC East Division title hopes faster than Steve Spurrier can bench quarterback Blake Mitchell.

**Pittsburgh (vs. Virginia).** There still are frayed nerves after Dave Wannstedt inherited a ready-made BCS team and didn't qualify for a bowl. Virginia has a new quarterback and

revamped defense. More important, Pitt has bupkus on the schedule after this game until late November.

**Penn State (vs. Akron).** A dangerous game for a team with a history of starting slowly. If Penn State quarterback **Anthony Morelli** presses and struggles and Akron quarterback Luke Getsy sparkles ... The Zips can't win in Happy Valley, can they?



JAY DROWNS / SN



Looky here: There's a burgeoning NFL factory in West Lafayette.

Hey, so what if Tom Dienhart is packing some alumni pride. You thinking yours is better? Anyone can sound off about the ol' alma mater at [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com).

JAY DROWNS / SN

## INSIDE DISH

The BCS made a big deal about extending its contract with Harris Interactive, the company that coordinates the Harris Poll, through 2010. Here's the bigger news that wasn't revealed: Nothing will change in the BCS formula during that period—even if this season ends with multiple one-loss or unbeaten teams. One BCS administrator says: "That formula is set. We went a few years of changing every season, and it was a public relations nightmare. You're not going to see that again." > More on the soap opera that is the Arizona State quarterback situation: **Derek Shaw** was one of

the top three quarterback recruits in the nation going into last season. He committed to Miami but eventually signed with Arizona State. After a year at Arizona State, Shaw left (even he saw the potential of then-freshman QB **Rudy Carpenter**) and walked on at Texas Tech—where he's sitting out a season and watching sophomore **Graham Harrell** and redshirt freshman **Chris Todd** compete for the starting spot. Shaw might never play again. Meanwhile,

besides Carpenter, the Sun Devils have only one scholarship quarterback on the roster, freshman **Danny Sullivan**, because **Sam Keller** transferred to Nebraska. Considering the recent history of injuries to ASU quarterbacks (see: **Jeff Krohn**, **Andrew Walter**, Keller), Shaw's decision looks more flawed. At least ASU recently received a commitment from **Nick**



MICHAEL McNAMARA / SN

Maybe Shaw should have kept his Sun Devils uniform for a few more months.

**Foles**, one of the top quarterback recruits in Texas. > Like coach **Bobby Bowden** needed this going into the season opener at Miami:

Florida State K **Gary Cismesia** has struggled much of fall camp, which has forced Bowden to take a more serious look at backup

**Graham Gano.**

Although Cismesia hit 17 of 24 field-goal attempts last season, he missed three of four against Florida and Penn State—including two in overtime against the Nittany Lions. The concern is Cismesia's mental toughness in big games. Although he nailed two field goals in the ACC championship game, he also

hooked a 23-yarder last year against Miami.

> Last season, it was redshirt freshman WR **Sidney Rice**. This year, freshman WR **Moe Brown** will be the latest impact player on the South Carolina offense. Brown gives South Carolina deep speed, something it didn't have last season. Brown has been nearly flawless in camp, and his physique and speed remind coach **Steve Spurrier** of former Florida All-American **Reidel Anthony**. Brown also will return punts and kicks. >

The Notre Dame coaching staff has raved about the progress of freshman OT **Sam Young**, who likely has won a starting job. If Young does start in the season opener against Georgia Tech—he would be the fourth true freshman in Notre Dame modern history to start on the offensive line—look for Georgia Tech to move speedy DE **Adamm Oliver** over Young and use Oliver and DT **Joe Anoai** on various twists to try to confuse Young.

UTEP has become a hot place for disgruntled former high school stars. RB **Terrell Jackson** left Oregon after spring practice and transferred to UTEP, and now former Florida State WR **Fred Rouse** has joined the team. Both were elite recruits. Some analysts say Rouse was the best player from the 2005 class.



## INSIDER MIKE DeCOURCY

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If a basketball recruiter is all thumbs, that might not be such a bad thing.

**ROFL** Kansas State coach Bob Huggins is not the most technically astute guy on the planet. He has a sleek Motorola RAZR cell phone, but he hasn't gotten rid of the ghastly, techno "Hello Moto" ring tone. He jokes he doesn't know how to turn on a computer.

When it comes to text messaging, Huggins says, "I can maybe get out, 'Call me.' But that's it. I don't do that."

Huggins does have ideas about using text messaging in recruiting, though. He contends too many coaches abuse this tool, which is why an NCAA committee has recommended limits on when text messages can be sent to prospects, a proposal that will be heard in the fall.

**IIRC** Just about every new method of communication has been subjected to NCAA (over)regulation, usually after it has been overused by overzealous coaches trying to get a recruiting edge.

Coaches can't use overnight messengers to send material to prospects, a rule developed with the lingering memory of the local FedEx man practically becoming an extended family member of guard Tony Harris when Tennessee recruited him in the mid-1990s.

Players, however, seem to like texting as a part of recruiting. Indianapolis point guard Jeff Teague gets about 15 texts per day from the schools he's considering, including Xavier, Indiana, Boston College and Wake Forest. Texting has allowed him to establish a relationship with new Indiana coach Kelvin Sampson, who was homebound during the summer recruiting period because of NCAA sanctions.

Texas assistant coach Russell Springman asks, at the first opportunity, whether a prospect has an unlimited text message plan

and whether he wants to be recruited in that fashion. Most players have such plans and want to stay in touch by text.

That does not mean Springman is bombarding players with texts, but he says it's an effective tool.

"You send the kid a greeting in the morning, and he gets back to you at his convenience," Springman says. "You know you're getting the kid."

**IMHO** Some coaches take this too far. There are stories of coaches texting prospects every hour, of players without unlimited plans winding up with sticker-shock bills of \$500 or more. Huggins knows some players spend classroom time texting instead of listening to their teachers, and it bugs him that some of those in-school texts are coming from college coaches.

All of this was considered by the academics/eligibility/compliance cabinet in recommending coaches be allowed to text only between 4-8 p.m. on weekdays and 8 a.m.-8 p.m. on weekends. The hours are a bit ridiculous, given that many players are at open gym games or practices most afternoons after school. Last call should be extended at least to 10 p.m.; teen-aged athletes are not drinking warm milk and tucking themselves into bed as the *Jeopardy!* credits roll. **TTFN** But the idea is sound.

**KEY** If any of the text shorthands are OYH (over your head), this will help:

**ROFL** Rolling on the floor laughing

**IIRC** If I recall correctly

**IMHO** In my humble opinion

**TTFN** Ta-ta for now



**INSIDE DISH**

Texas A&M SG **Josh Carter** is a rising player on a rising team. He had his moments as a freshman, and most came from behind the 3-point line. Now that Carter has spent a good chunk of his summer in the weight room, he will be better equipped to do damage in traffic. Carter also starred on an Athletes In Action team that toured Taiwan. He will nicely complement PG **Acie Law** and C **Joseph Jones** on the big-thinking Aggies. ➤ Duke coach **Mike Krzyzewski** wonders whether the freshmen kept from the NBA draft by the new age restriction will put serious effort into being students. Krzyzewski preferred the original proposal by NBA commissioner **David Stern**, which would have kept players out of the draft until they were two years removed from high school. ➤ Mississippi tried to sell the idea of playing a running style in recent recruiting efforts, but personnel

issues generally got in the way. Don't look for anything to keep new coach **Andy Kennedy** from playing fast. As interim coach at Cincinnati, Kennedy's team ranked fifth among Big East teams in scoring, despite usually using only a six-man rotation. ➤ The player who drew the most raves at the Pete Newell Big Man Camp was Villanova PF **Dante Cunningham**, an excellent athlete who needed to add some low-post skills after last season. Teammate SF **Shane Clark** also attended the camp and played well. California C **DeVon Hardin** attended the camp and listened to the coaches even though recent shoulder surgery kept him from contact drills. Georgia Tech coach **Paul Hewitt** showed up and observed the drills Newell and his staff excel at teaching. —M.D. and Kyle Veltrop



For college basketball recruiting blogs, call up [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com).



## INSIDER DAVE D'ALESSANDRO



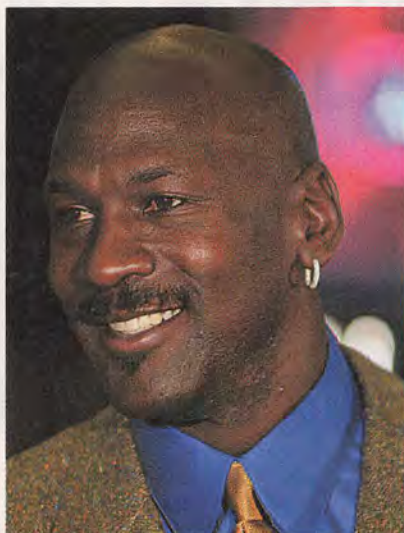
A billionaire and his money are not easily parted unless the icon-in-residence can show him why it's prudent.

BET: Better entertainment *and* talent

**T**he last time Michael Jordan spoke publicly was in late June, and when the discussion turned to investing in some players the new Charlotte Bobcats lord high muckamuck spoke with such gravitas that everybody in the room got the church giggles.

They weren't directed at Mike, who we can assume knows something about basketball talent, but his partner, who never has met a penny he couldn't pinch. Bob Johnson is the Bobs' owner, and, as everyone knows, he's the fellow who turned a \$15,000 loan into a \$3 billion cable network. Johnson came from a business in which he could make heaps of money just by running cheesy videos 24 hours a day. That is his success model. And like most businessmen who have built their fortunes, he is enamored of his methodology.

Don't deride him for that. In cable, if you know the number of market subscribers, you have profit certainty. Keep costs low, find some programming that appeals to the lowest common denominator, and—*voilà!*—you become stinking rich.



JOHN MARSHALL MANTLE / AP

**Jordan needs to teach the Bobcats' owner a few things about star power.**

But the basketball business operates very differently. Jordan, to his credit, seems to know this. In the NBA, you sell only success. Nobody wants to be associated with mediocrity, and if you don't pursue success, you have no chance of galvanizing interest—especially in a small market such as Charlotte, where the previous franchise poisoned the water and where the Bobs are competing

against football and NASCAR.

So far, they're losing to the competition, and that's not going to change as long as Johnson insists on maintaining a payroll that probably won't crack \$28 million this year.

"But I (can) go to Bob, and I feel I can enforce that things need to be done a certain way," Jordan insisted. "And we'll do it in a way that it's not the dollar sign you look at first."

Here's what Jordan has done since taking over: He has drafted Adam Morrison and signed Walter Herrmann and Othella Harrington to minimum-salary deals.

That's it. Of course, the free-agent market didn't exactly provide many options. But in an offseason defined by tedium, one might

have expected the game's most ardent gambler to at least fill up some cap space—if only to keep an apathetic fan base interested.

We'll give it a year. Maybe Mike is the one who can get his billionaire pal to recognize the price of doing business. Maybe he can get him to pursue a big-time free agent next summer (Vince Carter?) to augment what already is a solid seven-man rotation. But my guess is Mike recognizes he got played—that Johnson brought him in for brand-mingling. He is exploiting Jordan's unassailable image as the face for a style-over-substance model Johnson helped invent.

If that's true, Jordan has to treat Johnson as he used to treat defenders—in short, convince him that it's time to find a new line of work. **SN**

*Dave D'Alessandro is the NBA writer for The Star-Ledger of Newark, N.J.*

## speedread

Keep up on the latest offseason news at [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com).

Rarely does anyone credit Stephon Marbury for good sense, but his plan to sell his new sneakers for \$14.98 (and wear a pair himself) is masterful and deserves applause from every household in the basketball nation.

PG **Jay Williams** has found a taker but no givers. New Jersey is the first team to invite him to training camp, but there's a catch: The Nets soon will have 15 guaranteed contracts (after the signing of C **Mile Ilic**), so they would have to buy out PG **Jeff McInnis** to make room on the payroll for Williams. Williams is considering the invitation but might wait around for guaranteed money, which could be a long wait. ➤ Speaking of Jersey, there have been reports SG **Vince Carter** will consider jumping ship next summer—when he can opt out of his deal—to play in his hometown of Orlando. And maybe that scenario just became more plausible: Carter and his wife recently initiated divorce proceedings, and if his wife gains custody of their 1-year-old daughter and moves to Florida or her



hometown in South Carolina, Carter could be motivated to stay close by signing with the Magic or the Bobcats. Both teams will have ample cap space. ➤ The Magic is looking to move PG **Keyon Dooling**, who is behind **Jameer Nelson** and **Carlos Arroyo** on the depth chart, because \$7 million over the next two seasons is too much to pay a third-stringer. Miami, Dooling's former team, appears to be lining up first even though PG **Gary Payton** is expected to return as **Jason Williams'** backup. ➤ G **J.J. Redick** is shooting again after two months on the shelf with a herniated disk. ➤ The **Maloo Brothers** have taken their hits before, but when it came time to ante up for **Dikembe Mutombo's** hospital fund, the Kings' owners responded regally with a \$250,000 donation.





## FACTS FROM RACING HISTORY.

### 1910:

With Valvoline in the first big bore V-twin —aptly-named “The Flying Merkel”— future motorcycle Hall-of-Famer Morty Graves rockets to victory at the FAM 10-Mile National Motorcycle Championship in Philadelphia.



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# INSIDER LEE SPENCER

[lspencer@sportingnews.com](mailto:lspencer@sportingnews.com)



The COT: a racecar only its mother could love.

## I'm glad that thing isn't parked in my driveway



My eyes! My eyes! I have to hide my eyes!

GREGORY SHAMUS / GETTY IMAGES FOR NASCAR

**A** better name for NASCAR's Car of Tomorrow would be the Bastardmobile. With its funky splitter on the front end and the carbon fiber wing off the rear, the COT is butt-ugly. NASCAR spent five years developing the car and apparently spent no time on its appearance.

The car is so ugly NASCAR hardly endeared itself to diecast car manufacturers with this model—with the exception of cost. Every car looks identical to the rest, so diecast producers can implement a one-size-fits-all and simply slap on stickers in the appropriate places. Isn't that what they do for IROC cars?

But the concern for NASCAR isn't how the car looks or whether Action Performance's stock will rise from the sale of diecast cars. NASCAR's focus is on safety, competition and cost.

"I still have my reservations and concerns," four-time Cup champion Jeff Gordon says. "I think the car is not very attractive-looking. You know we had the opportunity to make a sleek-looking, sexy, cool car that took downforce away from the

car and was a little bit safer."

The COT's safety advances have been well-documented: a larger, well-insulated cocoon for the driver with energy-absorbing materials and double steel roll bars on the driver's side coupled with a steel floorboard.

The improved performance NASCAR trumpets remains to be seen. The cars were tested recently at Michigan. But varying opinions emerged about the aerodynamic qualities after the cars were running in packs of 10.

Gordon expects the car to draft well, but he's still concerned about aero push—or the car becoming unstable behind another car. Jeremy Mayfield, who tested the COT at Kentucky Speedway with additional data from Bill Davis Racing teammate Dave Blaney, sounded more satisfied.

"A driver looks for a certain feel in a car, and it's up to the crew and crew chief to help him find that," Mayfield says. "The car had a lot of grip, and it was equal in the front and the rear. That gave me a real stable feeling."

NASCAR claims teams will

save money because they won't have to build specialized cars—being able to adjust the rear wing and front splitter will end the need for different road course, short track, speedway and downforce cars.

But I don't believe for a second that an organization the size of Hendrick Motorsports or Roush Racing won't create as many cars as they feel are necessary to get an advantage over the competition.

At the end of the day, the Nextel Cup Series will be a rich man's IROC with hideous-looking cars. At least the drivers and horsepower will make a difference.

SN

## speedread

Don't be surprised if the Milwaukee Mile is busy with tests by Cup teams going into New Hampshire—the first race in the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup. Milwaukee's banking and size are similar to New Hampshire's, so teams can use it to play with chassis setups and brake packages.





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NASCAR

# INSIDE DISH



HAROLD HINSON FOR SN

This week will be pivotal for Michael Waltrip Racing because the candidates for the last seat on MWR's three teams will be presented to sponsors Burger King and Domino's. **David Reutimann**, 36, has to be considered the front-runner for the ride. Reutimann has been associated with both the Waltrips and Toyota since 2004. He's third in points in **Darrell Waltrip's** No. 17 truck and has four top 10 finishes running a partial Busch schedule for **Michael Waltrip** in preparation for the full Busch season in 2007. MWR would benefit from adding Reutimann, a hard charger who could run NBS and Cup schedules and offer data that can help get the Camry up to speed in its inaugural season.



ERIK PEREL FOR SN

Shame on anyone who questioned the commitment of **Dale Earnhardt Jr.** and his team. Last Saturday night's dramatic comeback at Bristol Motor Speedway showed the No. 8 bunch is for real. After the team struggled to find a comfortable setup for the car on Friday, Earnhardt qualified 40th. But savvy pit calls by crew chief **Tony Eury Jr.** and solid pit stops kept Earnhardt within striking distance most of the race. He finished third and moved up to ninth in points. Dale Earnhardt Inc. has been tweaking the pit crew all season in an attempt to improve its performance.

The four manufacturers have submitted the 2007 noses and hoods for the Car of Tomorrow. NASCAR planned to test them in a wind tunnel early this week. NASCAR also must prepare templates for next season. This year's inspection process involves 32 templates. Expect NASCAR to increase that number to eliminate gray areas that have enabled teams to find advantages. NASCAR will precertify all chassis at its research center in Concord, N.C., before the cars are allowed on the track. If a car is involved in a wreck, the teams will have to recertify the chassis before the car returns to competition. Bar code stickers will control the inventory. ➤ **Jack Roush** debunked rumors that **Mark Martin** was out of the running for a Cup ride in 2007. Roush said a more likely scenario would feature Martin, his flagship driver, running a partial schedule in the No. 60 car currently driven by

**Boris Said**. Does that mean Said could be headed for Martin's current car, the No. 6, next season? Partially because of his penchant for giving vibrant interviews, Said is a marketer's dream, and giving him a full-time ride certainly would get applause from the Said Heads. ➤ Bill Davis Racing did the expected at Bristol when it announced it had hired former Evernham Motorsports driver **Jeremy Mayfield**. Though Mayfield isn't likely to race a BDR car until 2007, he has talked to other teams about fill-in roles. Mayfield also will test extensively for Davis in the fall, a situation that will significantly help the development of the Camry for 2007. ➤ Add Richard Childress Racing to the list of organizations following the four-car model. RCR officials say a fourth car, which will concentrate on COT races, will make its debut near the end of 2007. A full-time deal for 2008 looks imminent.

## You're being very truculent

After Carl Edwards confronted Dale Earnhardt Jr. in victory lane two weeks ago, Earnhardt called Edwards *uncouth*. Then Earnhardt said he'd been trying to use that word all year. Here are more words we'd love to hear Junior incorporate into his interviews.

**Insouciant.** "I act all insouciant and s— about the Chase, but I want to make it."

**Obsequious.** "Matt Kenseth is a friend of mine, but he's way too obsequious on the track."

**Plethora.** "A plethora of flat tires made last season's race at Lowe's a nightmare."

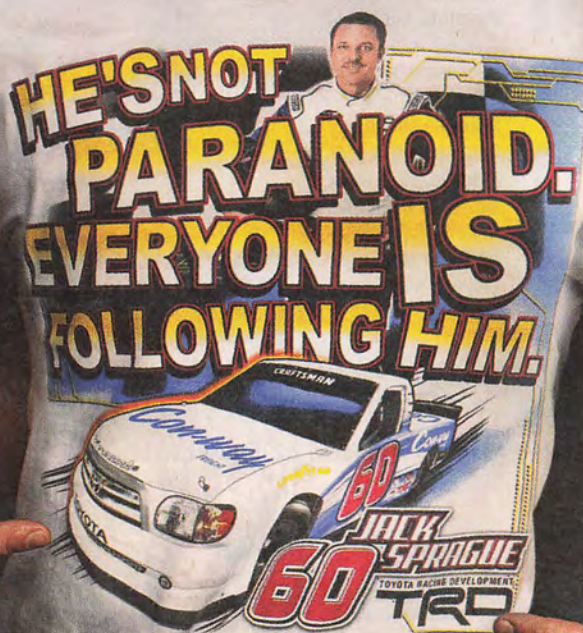
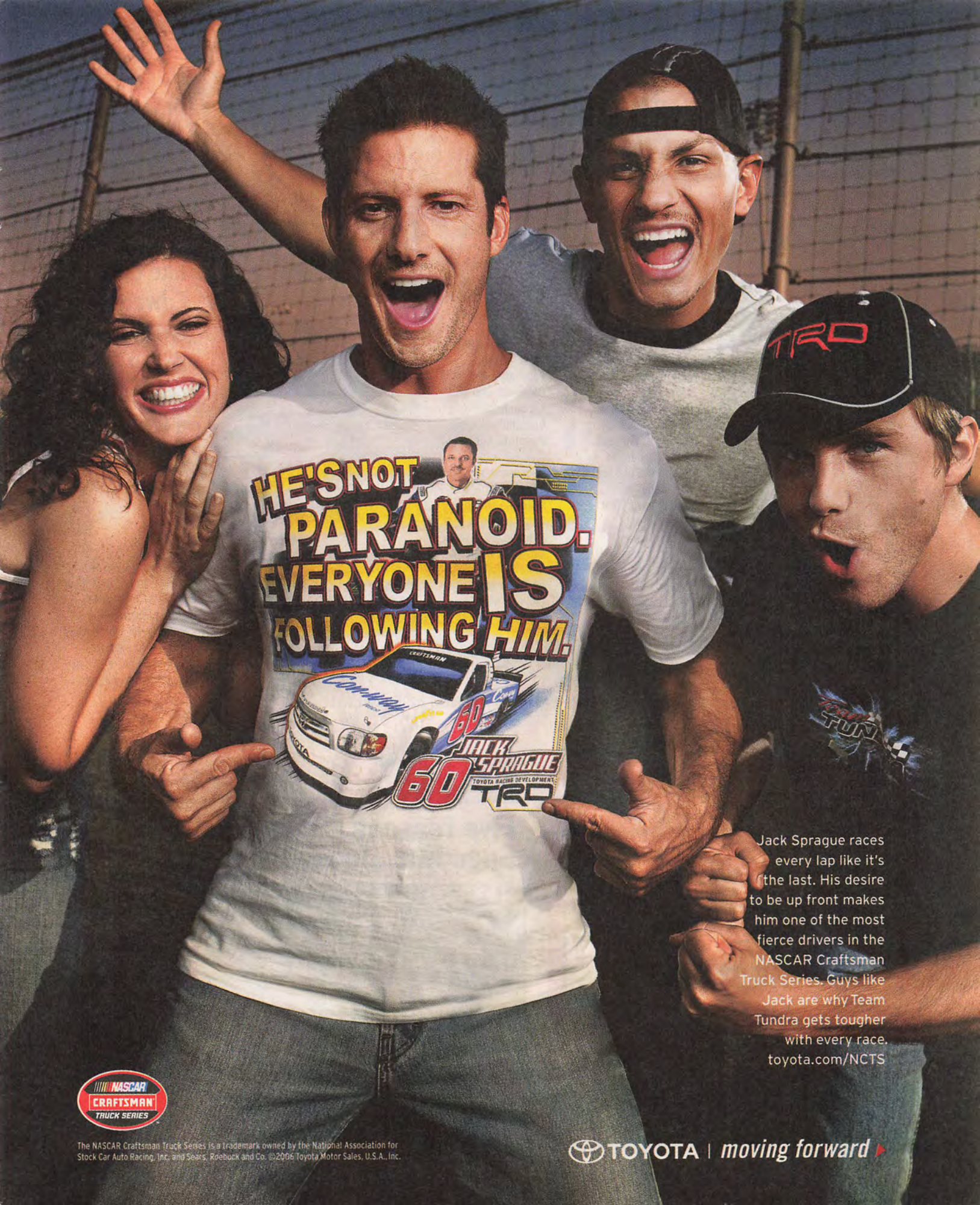
**Disingenuous.** "Carl Edwards' public apologies after the fact are disingenuous."

**Levis.** "These Levis are way more stylin' than those lame Wranglers." —Matt Crossman



HAROLD HINSON FOR SN






Jack Sprague races every lap like it's the last. His desire to be up front makes him one of the most fierce drivers in the NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series. Guys like Jack are why Team Tundra gets tougher with every race. [toyota.com/NCTS](http://toyota.com/NCTS)



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## Pit box Who will win at California?

Fantasy experts Roger Kuznia and Vinnie Iyer pick Nextel Cup race winners. Follow their running feud at [sportingnews.com/nascar/pitbox](http://sportingnews.com/nascar/pitbox).



**Vinnie:** As Nextel Cup returns to Cali, I have to go with a Hollywood-friendly driver. Usually, that would be Jeff Gordon, but I'm going with his star teammate, **Jimmie Johnson**, who will get his second career victory at Fontana. Also, it's hard to keep from picking the leader in points at any kind of track, anywhere. Roger, expect Jimmie and me to extend our respective leads this week.

**Sleeper:** Mark Martin.  
**Not so fast:** Tony Stewart.

**Roger:** So Vinnie picks the driver from El Cajon, Calif.? Let me introduce you to El Caballo (translation: The Horse), aka **Greg Biffle**. He led the most laps in February's race at California and had his car handling beautifully through the turns, but he finished 42nd because of an engine failure. Biffle also was strong at both races this year at Michigan, a track similar to California. Biffle will win this race and start building momentum for 2007.

**Sleeper:** J.J. Yeley.  
**Not so fast:** Bobby Labonte.

**Nextel Cup points** (based on how the experts' choices finished in points races): Vinnie 2,295; Roger 2,119.



## BLOG ALERT

You don't get abs like Carl Edwards has without being dedicated at a level I can't relate to.

Yeah, but you wouldn't believe the fitness level of Matt Crossman's typing fingers. After reading his blog entries, you might want to exercise your digits at [sportingnews.com](http://sportingnews.com).

## DOWN THE ROAD presented by Castrol GTX

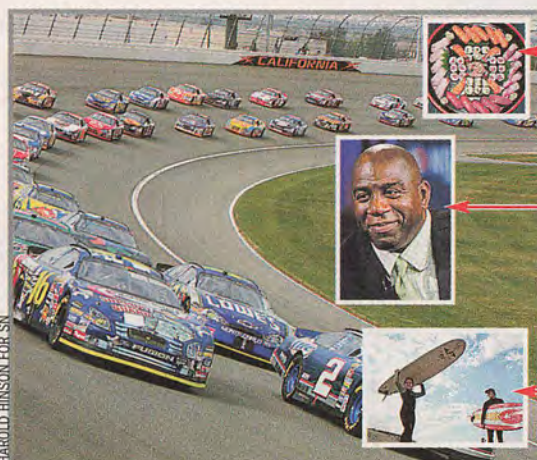


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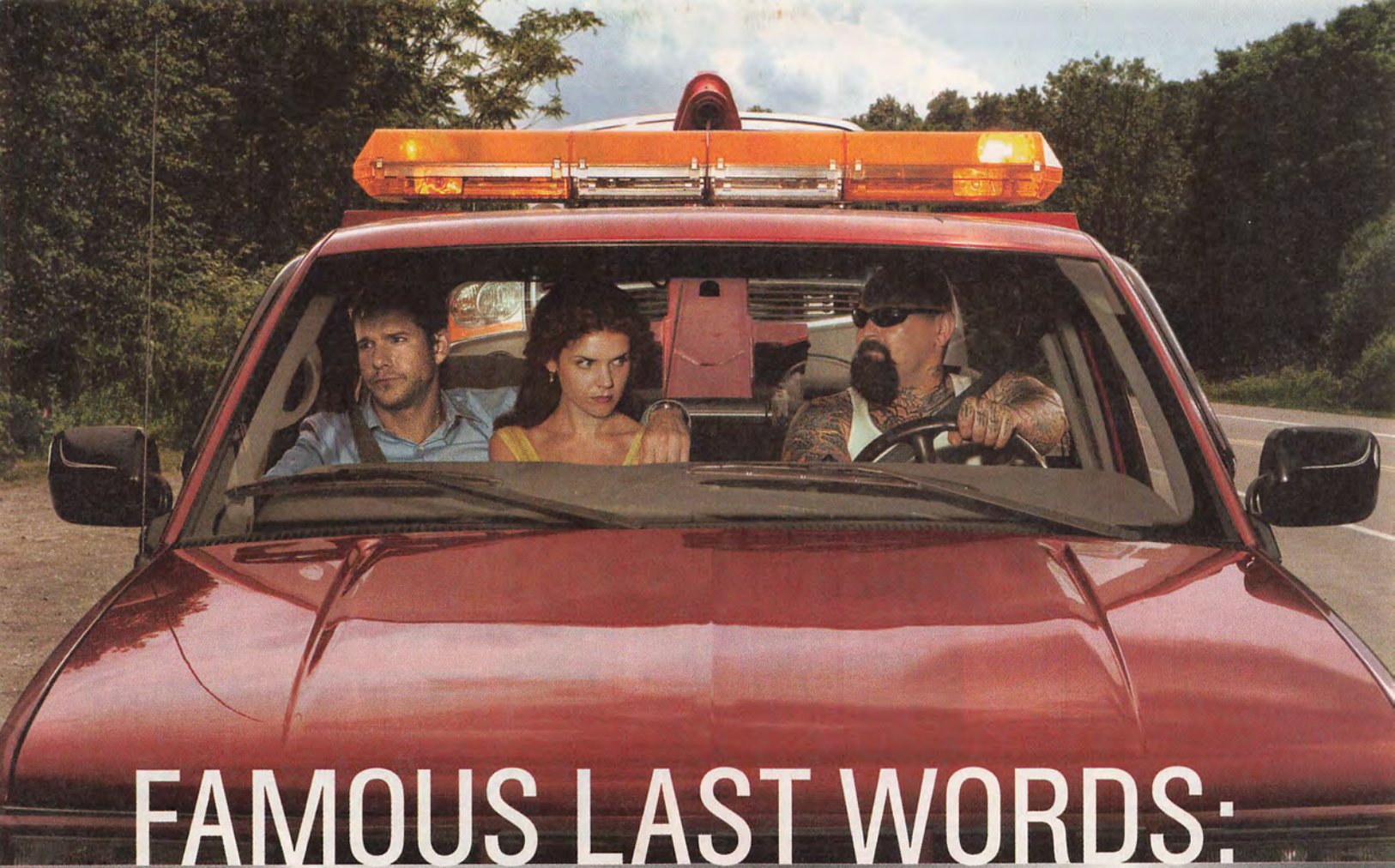
## TAKE 5

### Five reasons California Speedway doesn't sell out



- 1 There's no sushi stand next to the barbecue vendor.
- 2 Fashionably late works at Chavez Ravine, not at Fontucky.
- 3 Magic Johnson couldn't get a Starbucks franchise approved at the track.
- 4 Race traffic isn't enough for these road warriors.
- 5 No place to park surfboards in the infield. —L.S.





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# All-access The pace car



0893

It's one of Tony Stewart's favorite targets—what isn't?—and so much more. What it does, who drives it and who's along for the ride—hey, is that you, Rummy?

By Matt Crossman

## Who drives the pace car?

Brett Bodine, a veteran of 480 Nextel Cup starts (the last in 2003). He now works in NASCAR's research and development department. Bodine's racing experience is crucial in the pace car. After rain or a wreck in which debris or fluid covers the track, he determines when conditions are safe.

## How fast does it go?

The speed of the pace car during cautions depends on the size of the track and ranges from 35 to 65 mph.

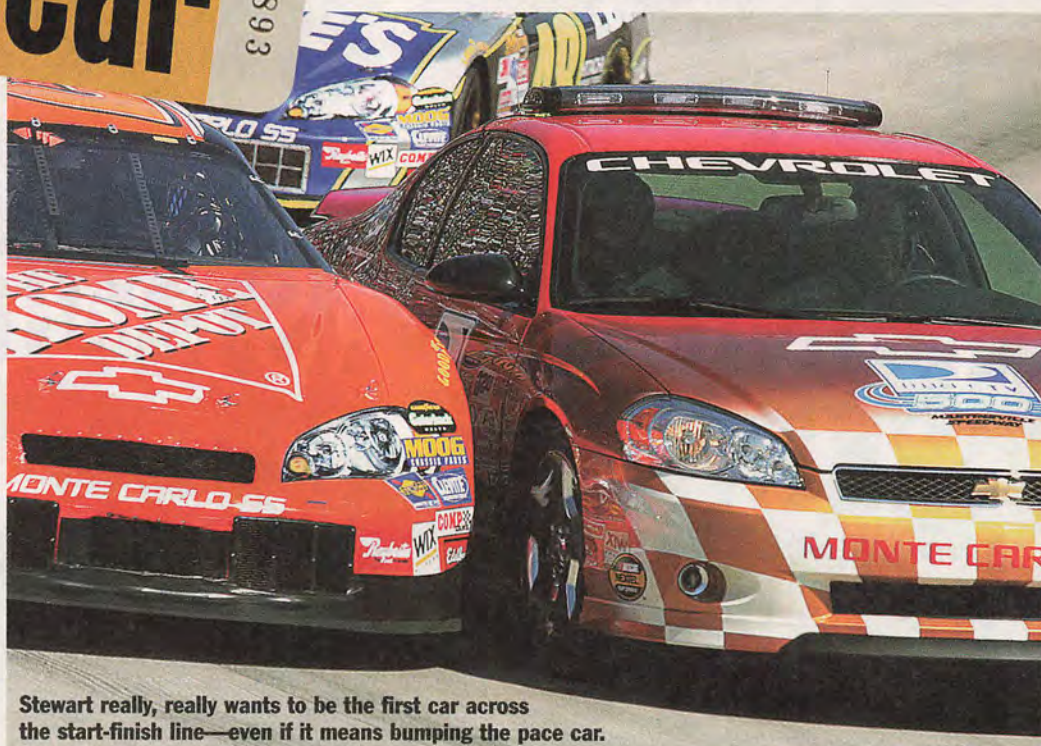
## Is Bodine driving solo?

Nope. Another NASCAR official, Wayne Auton, rides shotgun. (Except for the time Auton was, um, checking for deer ... seeing a man about a horse ... otherwise occupied.) Celebrities have gotten in on the action, too. Jay Leno drove during parade laps at the Daytona 500 this year. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld tagged along at the 2004 fall Richmond race.

"He didn't want to get out," Bodine says. "He wanted to spend the whole day in there. Very nice man. He loves our sport. He knew all the drivers and all the players. He was like a kid at his first race."

## What does the pace car do besides drive out front during cautions?

Before the race, the pace car circles the track at the pit road speed limit. Drivers set their



Stewart really, really wants to be the first car across the start-finish line—even if it means bumping the pace car.



Here's hoping that seat is comfortable; Bodine won't be leaving it until the race is over.

tachometers according to Bodine's speed during this time because racecars don't have speedometers.

The pace car also helps clean the track, though that's not an official function. Because the pace car's tires have tread (racecar tires don't), they collect rubber left on the track by the racecars. The grooves in the tread get so clogged, the steering wheel vibrates.

The result is a cleaner track where the pace car runs. Tony Stewart once rubbed doors with the pace car at Martinsville, trying to persuade Bodine to "clean up" a lower line—the one Stewart was running.

JIM FLUHARTY / NASCAR ILLUSTRATED

JAY DROWNS / SN



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# NASCAR

All-access

The pace car



Stewart's not in sight,  
so Bodine gets out  
... for now.

JAY DROWNS / SN

## The cars Bodine drives—are they normal?

"For the most part, the engines are pretty much stock that any customer can buy," says Michael Accavitti, director of Dodge Motorsports and SRT Global Marketing.

The exhaust is tweaked to make the engines louder. Sometimes the cars get a horsepower boost to make them fast enough to catch the field. Some pace cars have normal paint jobs; some are tricked out. Lights are installed on the roof of each car.

The type of pace car is determined by manufacturer relationships with each track. At Michigan, the car is a Chevrolet Monte Carlo. At Lowe's Motor Speedway, it's a Toyota Camry. At Kansas, it's a Ford Fusion. At Daytona, it's a Chevy Corvette, Bodine's favorite. Some pace cars



JAY DROWNS / SN

With 480 Cup starts, Bodine is intimately familiar with the tracks.

stay at the track for all of its races, and some pace cars are moved to different tracks using haulers. There's always a backup.

## What does Bodine do during the race?

He never leaves the car. It remains parked with easy access to the track. He keeps up with

race action on a FanView, a handheld device that provides access to radio broadcasts and team radio conversations.

Bodine stays in constant contact with race officials; when a caution comes out, he floors the gas to get onto the track. His most important task is to catch the field immediately; sometimes that means opening up whatever

car he's driving. It's not unusual for him to go 120 mph to get by the leader. Once Bodine gets out front, the cars bunch up and crews go to work cleaning up the track.

## If I had to guess which driver messes with the pace car, I'd guess Stewart. Am I right?

Yes. He hits the pace car every time he has the lead and the caution comes out. "He's going to give you a shot in the back, just to say hello," Bodine says.

## I want to buy a pace car. Can I?

Not unless you luck out and find one at a charity auction. Retired pace cars also go to museums and junkyards but not to the open market.

SN





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# The old college try

Former jocks are helping teams get a leg up in the pits

By Jessica Daves



BOB LEVERONE / SN

**Williams traded his football pads for a Petty Enterprises firesuit.**



HAROLD HINSON FOR SN (2)

**D**ion "Rocko" Williams grew up 45 minutes from Atlanta Motor Speedway, but for the Georgia boy with pigskin on the brain, the track might as well have been light years away.

"I never knew it existed, pretty much," Williams says. "I wasn't a NASCAR fan at all. I was a football player."

Reality has changed for the former Wake Forest linebacker. Ten years of football and seven concussions later, Williams no longer chases running backs—he chases the perfect pit stop. He is a front tire carrier for Kyle Petty.

With sponsors pouring more money into the sport and applying greater pressure to win, teams are looking for any competitive edge, including putting former college and pro athletes in the pits.

No experience with racecars? No problem—it can be taught. Reacting quickly, running fast, handling pressure—those can't be taught. But they can mean the difference between a 13.5- or

a 14.5-second pit stop, a first- or 10th-place finish and a spot in the Chase or a meaningless end to the season.

Hendrick Motorsports team personnel director Andy Papathanassiou says roughly 30 percent of Hendrick's pit crew members are former college athletes. On Evernham

Motorsports' No. 10 team, there are two ex-college football players, one ex-college baseball player and one ex-hockey player.

Ray Evernham recruits former college athletes, and other teams use word of mouth. A Petty pit coach "discovered" the No. 25's rear tire carrier, Matt Myers, a former fullback at Wake Forest, when he visited the Richard Petty Museum with college friends. Williams heard about the NASCAR gig from Myers after concussions ended Williams' pro football career in 2004.

Though NASCAR has been around since the late 1940s, teams didn't realize the benefit of an athletic, fit pit crew until the early '90s. Once upon a time, teams focused their limited

## Measuring up

A football coach wouldn't want a 320-pound dude running routes or a 185-pounder on the line protecting his quarterback. It's the same with a pit crew. Certain physical traits are helpful for certain jobs, says Hendrick Motorsports director of personnel Andy Papathanassiou.

**Jackman:** Ideally, he's a middle linebacker type—a guy who combines size with speed and strength. He needs to be strong enough to get the car up in one pump and fast enough to follow the tire changer.

**Tire changers:** Tire changers and carriers both must fit in the same small area, so it helps if the changers are smaller and have quickness, agility and hand-eye coordination. Think a shortstop or second baseman.

**Tire carriers:** Again, the ideal is a linebacker frame. He can give up a little speed, compared to a jackman, but he still must have great strength.

**Gas man:** He should be tall so he can keep the can as straight and high as possible. The straighter and higher the can sits, the faster the gas comes out.

**Catch can man:** Being tall helps here, too, so he can work with a tall gas man and have the reach to make any necessary adjustments to the car. —J.D.

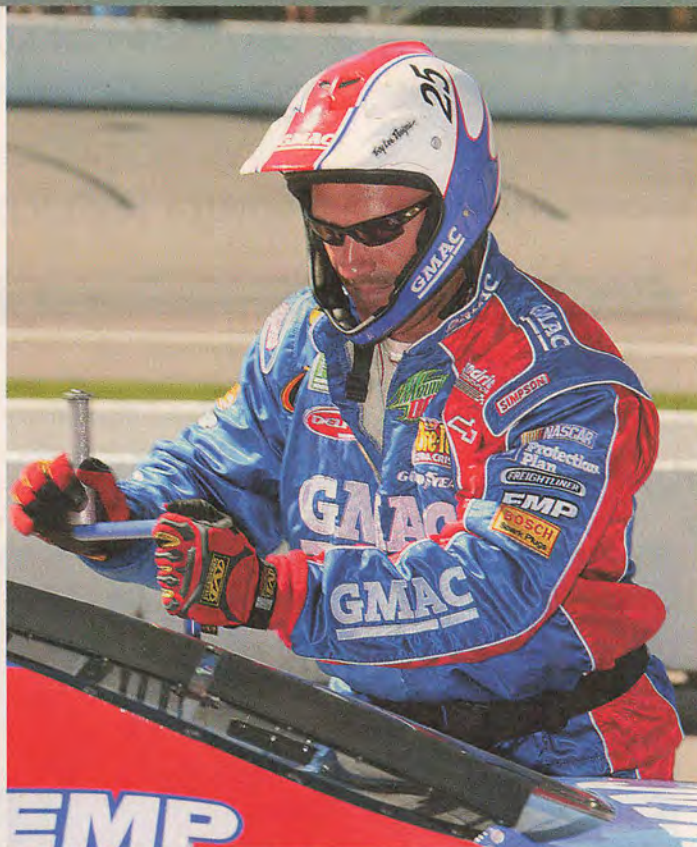


resources on improving their cars rather than pit stop times—until Papathanassiou, a former offensive lineman at Stanford, started looking for work around the garage in 1991.

"Because I didn't have a lot of racing experience, the thing I identified with the most was the pit stop," he says. "It sort of looked like a football play to me. When I asked about getting involved with practices and the

**The thing I identified with the most was the pit stop. It sort of looked like a football play to me.**

—Hendrick Motorsports team personnel director Andy Papathanassiou



Former college athletes such as Myers, who played football at Wake Forest, make up about 30 percent of Hendrick Motorsports' pit crews.

team, I was told they didn't really practice much, if at all. That's sort of when the light bulb went off."

Papathanassiou eventually caught on with Hendrick Motorsports, and under his guidance, Jeff Gordon's pit crew started practicing and working out. When Gordon won the Cup championship in 1995, the garage took notice of how he consistently beat everyone off pit road. By the late '90s, almost every team had adopted the Papathanassiou method, and pit times dropped.

Now teams, armed with athletes, are performing pit stops in about 13 seconds compared with 18 or 19 seconds in the early '90s—a difference of about a third of a lap around Bristol.

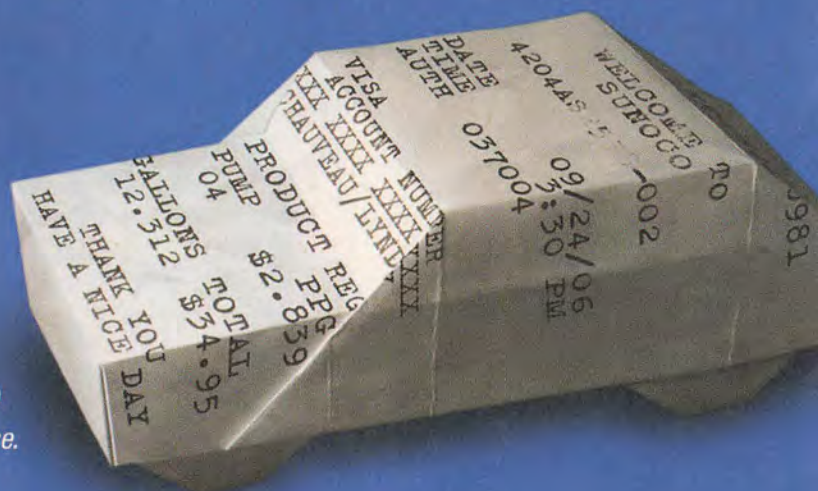
Teams aren't the only ones benefiting. Athletes now have other options to showcase their skills. Williams, the boy who only wanted to play football, now has a new dream: becoming a crew chief.

"This is a sport that I can see myself retiring from," Williams says. "Now that I'm here, I think I'm here for good."

SN

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# NASCAR DRIVER REPORTS

Driver reports, written by Lee Spencer, will appear next in the October 6 issue.

## How are the Toyota teams progressing?

### Michael Waltrip

There's not a better front man in NASCAR than Waltrip. Who else could sell major sponsors on a multimillion-dollar vision that existed solely on paper? Once the 150,000-plus-square-foot Michael Waltrip Racing World project, an interactive motorsports complex, comes to fruition in 2007, those who doubted his business acumen won't again. Critics who question Waltrip's performance this season don't understand the difficulty of making the transition from one organization to another. Waltrip's own team for 2007 is in place with veteran crew chief **Larry Carter** leading the charge.

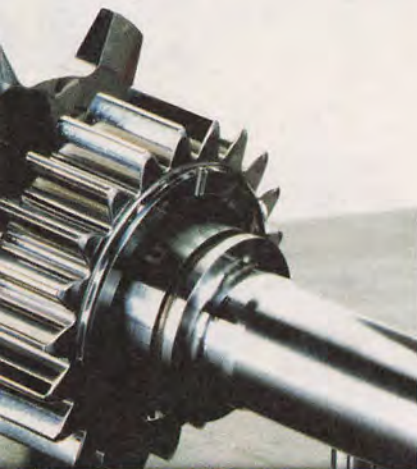
### Daytona 2005.

Whether a driver needs a uniform, a team needs a critical part, or a race official needs a checkered flag, the only delivery truck you'll see trackside every weekend is the Big Brown Truck.<sup>SM</sup>

Official delivery company of



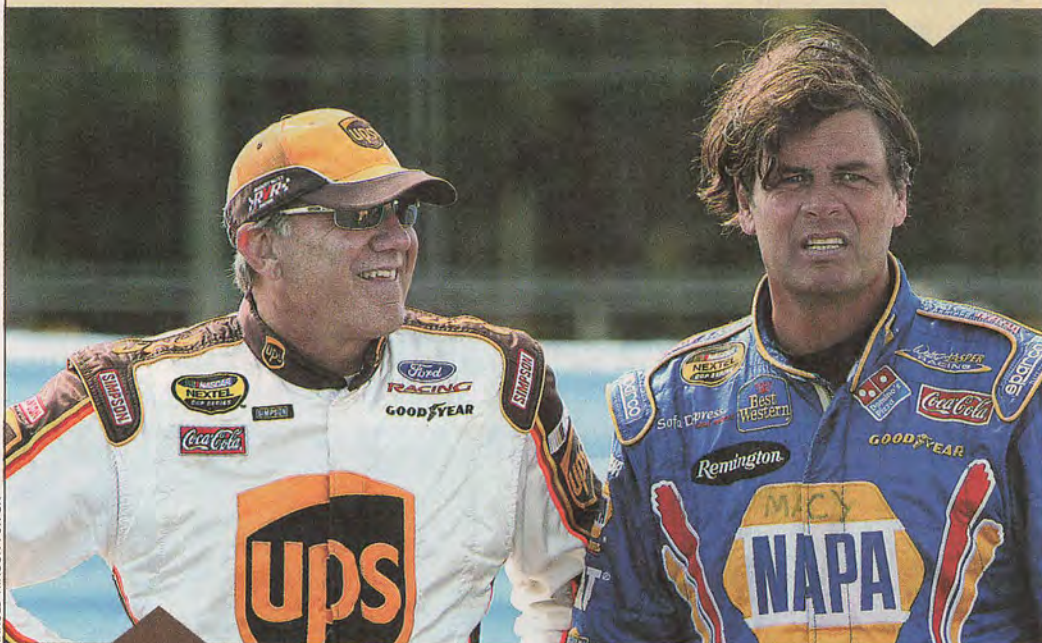
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racing.ups.com



HAROLD HINSON FOR SN



**DALE JARRETT** He is the only past champion among the Toyota drivers, though that will change if **Bill Elliott** joins the Team Red Bull stable. Jarrett's performance over the past several years provides no indication he'll ever finish in the top 10 in points again. He has just two victories in the past 3½ seasons, and given the revolving door of crew chiefs on the No. 88 car, it's easy to wonder whether he plays nice with others. It's unlikely MWR will placate the aging racer as **Robert Yates** did.

**JEREMY MAYFIELD** His record over the past three years stands above the other Toyota competitors'. He was one of seven drivers to qualify for the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup in each of the first two years. Currently on the Cup sidelines, he has plenty of time to test the new Camry and the Car of Tomorrow. The information he gathers will benefit both Bill Davis Racing teams. For Mayfield, competing with his team before the end of this year would be a bonus.

**BRIAN VICKERS** Youth is on Vickers' side; past performance is not. Vickers certainly can't blame his Hendrick Motorsports equipment for his struggles over the past three years. He won a Busch championship with HMS in 2003, but in 101 Cup

starts his best finish is second. Vickers must use the opportunity with Team Red Bull as a fresh start. Elliott is working with the team as a test driver, so Vickers' car will be up to speed when he jumps in it at Daytona.

**DAVE BLANEY** If familiarity counts for anything, Blaney will benefit from spending nearly half of his stock car career at Bill Davis Racing, including this season. He has a solid relationship with his crew, including crew chief **Kevin Hamlin** and engineer **Derrick Finley**, and it's unlikely the team's roster will change. Blaney knows what to expect from **Terry Elledge's** engines, and BDR's four-year association with Toyota has developed beneficial synergies between the two organizations.



**UPS NASCAR Files - Daytona**

July 2005

**2:25 pm / Friday**

Joe Nemechek breaks a transmission during qualifying.

**2:33 pm / Friday**

The crew wonders what the heck Joe did to the transmission.

**2:35 pm / Friday**

Joe wonders what the heck the crew did to the transmission.

**2:36 pm / Friday**


They decide finger-pointing is for 4th graders and call UPS.

**8:30 am / Saturday**

UPS delivers the new transmission to the infield garage in plenty of time for Saturday's practice.



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# DAVE KINDRED

[dkindred@sportingnews.com](mailto:dkindred@sportingnews.com)

In the ghost town that is New Orleans, there are small signs of life. One happy sign is the reborn football team at Ben Franklin High School.

## After hell and high water, football again has a place

**W**hat are we doing to New Orleans? A year after Katrina, that beautiful city is all but a ghost town, as if abandoned for its mistake of getting in a hurricane's way.

A friend of mine wrote that it made no sense, what he had seen there, the place still in ruins, as if Katrina had happened a day ago rather than a year ago. His blog entry read:

"You wonder why our country spends billions and billions of dollars to help foreign people, to rebuild a third-world country, to fight and to kill and to spread our perfect form of government when we have something right here in our own backyard that needs so much."

So I called Ben Franklin High School. It's Louisiana's No. 1 academic high school, a proud place hard by Lake Pontchartrain, maybe a mile from a levee that gave way during the hurricane and let floodwaters loose on the city.

On the phone, Franklin football coach Charles Firreno warned me: "Hang on a second. I'm about to blow my whistle."

Then came a shrill trill sounding its order to stop the foolin' around and do what I tell you, which in this case meant that the coach, in a voice authoritative, explained to his P.E. students: "You need to be in your seats."

A year ago, in the same gymnasium, the coach had stood in water 2 feet deep.

A year ago, after the hurricane, the old U.S. Marine Corps helicopter pilot had tied a surgical mask around his face to do work



**Firreno cleaned up his gym floor, but much of New Orleans hasn't received the same attention.**



he had never imagined.

A year ago, when Katrina destroyed his blocking sleds and tackling dummies and helmets and all the footballs, Firreno had walked into the school with its principal, Carol Christen, who would describe the scene:

"I met Charlie at the school, and we went in through the front door. There was floodwater everywhere. So still. Nothing alive. A terrible smell."

At every turn she saw despair in nuclear-winter shades of brown and gray. "So hot, so lifeless, so devastating," Christen says. She saw mud, muck and mold. The school she loved, she saw it dying. "I burst into tears."

Not for long. The second and third floors were undamaged. "My spirits lifted. Charlie and I began plotting."

While the coach directed cleanup crews of parents and teachers, the principal devised a legalistic end run around a bureaucracy that would have closed the school all year. On

January 17, 2006, the 300th birthday of Benjamin Franklin, the school was again open, alive.

It had lost its football season, but football is no big deal there. In a student population of 628—down from 936 before Katrina—girls outnumber boys almost 2-1. It's also true, as Christen herself puts it with pride, that Franklin is "known as 'the nerdy school.'"

Still, when you're a football player, even at Franklin, no football is bad news. "A major bummer," says Andrew Butler, a junior tight end/defensive end. "There'd been a lot of hype for our season, so it was really a letdown."

"We were going to have a great team, *great*," says the team captain, senior lineman Dwayne Arceneaux. "We were going to change all the things that people said about us. To not get that chance, it was crushing."

This spring, 15 players reported to football practice. "We'd lost half our shoulder pads to the hurricane," Firreno says, adding wryly, "but that was OK because we'd lost half our players, too."

Now, with families returning to New Orleans, Firreno's roster is up to 30-plus for Franklin's season opener September 1.

It's a small step, playing football, and it has been a long time coming. Franklin suffered \$4.5 million of damage to its building and contents; only a fraction of that was covered by flood insurance. On its own, the school raised \$1 million to start its recovery. One day last month, Christen sent her students out to help families cut scrub trees and wild weeds covering up once-handsome homes.

"As I drive to school through the neighborhood," the principal says, "I realize we have not come very far. I try to ignore it, but it's hard, real hard, and I can't let it get me down, OK? But it doesn't seem like anything has been done."

I mentioned to Carol Christen what my friend said about billions spent around the world while New Orleans hangs on for dear life.

Her voice, weary: "Isn't that what I said?" **SN**



# GOT CAUGHT ON THE BIG SCREEN

(PICKING A WINNER)



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EVEN WHEN  
YOU'RE NOT

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For motor oil, an engine is a complex, dangerous mechanism crammed with parts that move, grind and slam. Life inside its metallic shell is brutal. Fortunately, Pennzoil Platinum™ is custom-built to stand up to that brutality.

### Some motor oils have trouble handling the pressure.

At its most basic, the internal-combustion process in an engine produces horsepower. However, one of the unpleasant by-products of horsepower is pressure. Extreme pressure. Destructive pressure. Pressure that changes the viscosity of oil, which, in turn, leads to the oil losing its ability to provide lubrication and protection to all those other moving parts. But what if there were an oil that was designed to maintain its viscosity under intense pressure? An oil that stood up to every obstacle in its path? An oil that helped engines run stronger, longer?

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Pennzoil Platinum™ Full Synthetic Motor Oil was formulated to provide superior lubrication and protection, more than regular motor oil. But our chemists weren't satisfied. (And to be honest, if they were, they wouldn't be Pennzoil chemists anymore.) So they added a unique molecular formulation that not only withstands pressure, it actually thrives in it: the adaptive molecule. When Pennzoil Platinum™ is faced with pressure, its adaptive molecules cluster together, creating a cushion or barrier to absorb the impact—like microscopic shock absorbers.



### Pressure's ugly partners: heat and shearing.

Then, of course, there's also heat and shearing. When Pennzoil Platinum™ senses severe heat, the adaptive molecules break apart to avoid harm, yet still stay strong enough to provide excellent protection. And finally, when adaptive molecules happen to come across spots in the engine where they can be cut up or sheared into molecular pulp, they once again split into smaller pieces in order to slip through high shear areas, reforming as soon as they are no longer in harm's way.

### Thank you, sir. May I have another?

Now for the best part: adaptive molecules can go from separating to avoid shear, to clumping together to withstand pressure, right back to separating to evade heat—over and over and over again. This helps Pennzoil Platinum™ maintain viscosity, which helps keep your engine running stronger, longer. Okay, enough reading. It's time for an oil change. Or, more accurately, it's time for a molecular upgrade to Pennzoil Platinum™ Full Synthetic Motor Oil.



Find out more about adaptive molecules at [PennzoilPlatinum.com](http://PennzoilPlatinum.com).

# Not just oil, Pennzoil.



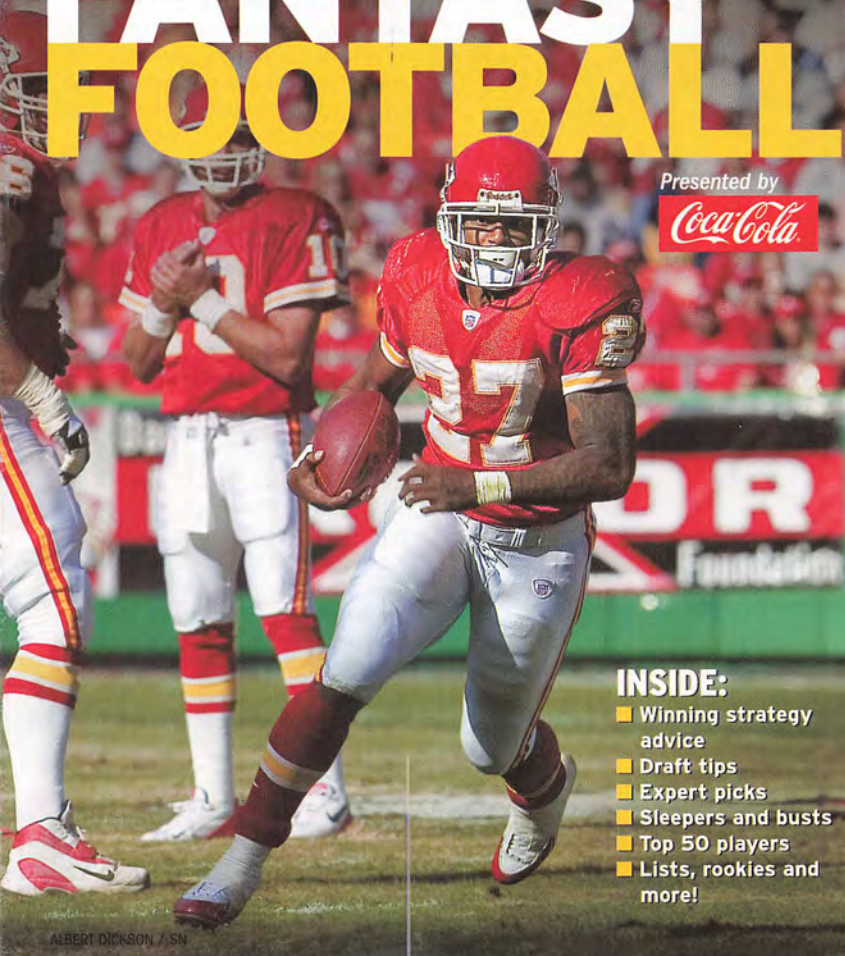
SUPPLEMENT TO

**SportingNews**

Your **EXPERT** guide to

# FANTASY FOOTBALL

Presented by



## INSIDE:

- Winning strategy advice
- Draft tips
- Expert picks
- Sleepers and busts
- Top 50 players
- Lists, rookies and more!



# POSITIONAL STRATEGY

Manning



**Quarterback:** Peyton Manning likely will go in the first 12 picks. Every other quarterback should drop to the third round, and good options still are likely to be there in the sixth and seventh. You won't need to fill your starting job in the initial rounds, but don't wait too long to get a backup and even a third-stringer. Quality depth always is a plus.

**Running back:** You want running backs, but not any running back will do. There's only a small number of elite ballcarriers. That's why you need to set your target on those guys until they're gone, which will be within the first two rounds. Later, in the middle rounds, you can begin focusing on sleepers who could become elite backs.

**Wide receiver:** It's important to get an elite option early, but the trick is finding second and third receivers in the middle rounds who will produce better than their draft position. That will allow you to use most of your earlier picks on running backs and still come away with good receivers.

**Tight end:** You want a difference-maker, but you don't want to reach to get him. To avoid that, think of each tight end in relation to wide receiver production and draft accordingly. Antonio Gates' numbers translate to that of a No. 1 wide receiver, so he's a legitimate third-rounder. But you still can find good options as late as the seventh.

BOB LEVERONE / SN





**Kicker:** The difference last season between the top fantasy kicker and the 12th-best was three points a week. In 2004, it was just two points. With that small of a difference, who cares if you miss out on Adam Vinatieri or Neil Rackers? Let some saps take them way too early while you load up on skill players.

**Individual defensive players:**

The top IDP options will start coming off the board in the middle rounds. If you're compelled to get in on the action, do so only if you're grabbing an elite player. Otherwise, it makes sense to wait to draft your IDPs because their value typically fluctuates more than that of an offensive player from season to season.

**Defense/special teams:** Don't get sucked in by an early run on defenses. Every league has an owner who will reach for a defense in the seventh or eighth round and cause a mild panic. Simply keep a list of your top 10 options and wait as long as possible before taking a defense/special teams. Let the draft—not one goofy owner—dictate things.

ALBERT DICKSON / SN



Vinatieri

*Text by Fantasy Source Football experts Chris Bahr, Rob Hurtt, Vinnie Iyer, Roger Kuznia, Brendan Roberts and George Winkler. For more expert analysis, check out Fantasy Source Football, your online fantasy authority, at [fantasygames.sportingnews.com/football](http://fantasygames.sportingnews.com/football).*







Williams

ALBERT DICKSON / SN

# DRAFTTIPS

■ Break your rankings into tiers of talent. If there are only 10 receivers you would want as your No. 1, draw a line under the last one. Seeing where values drop off will help prevent you from reaching for a player.

■ The top group of receivers is strong enough that by the middle of the second round, you might want to take a receiver instead of a second running back. The running back options at that point won't be overly impressive.

■ Be careful with rookies, who rarely match the hype that surrounds them. You might think you're getting this year's Cadillac Williams when you're actually getting this year's J.J. Arrington.

■ If you start three wide receivers in your league, taking running backs with your first three picks is unwise.

■ Don't wait too long to draft the actual backups for your top two running backs. Those who drafted Priest Holmes without handcuffing him to Larry Johnson last year know how painful that can be.

## EXPERT PICKS



Chris Bahr



Rob Hurtt



Vinnie Iyer

**Must-have sleeper**

Frank Gore, RB

Chester Taylor, RB

David Givens, WR

**Must-miss stumbler**

Marc Bulger, QB

Joe Jurevicius, WR

Fred Taylor, RB

**I wouldn't draft**

Randy Moss, WR

Deuce McAllister, RB

Michael Vick, QB

**Worth the gamble**

Terrell Owens, WR

Daunte Culpepper, QB

Carson Palmer, QB

**Underrated**

Thomas Jones, RB

Deion Branch, WR

Dolphins defense

**Overrated**

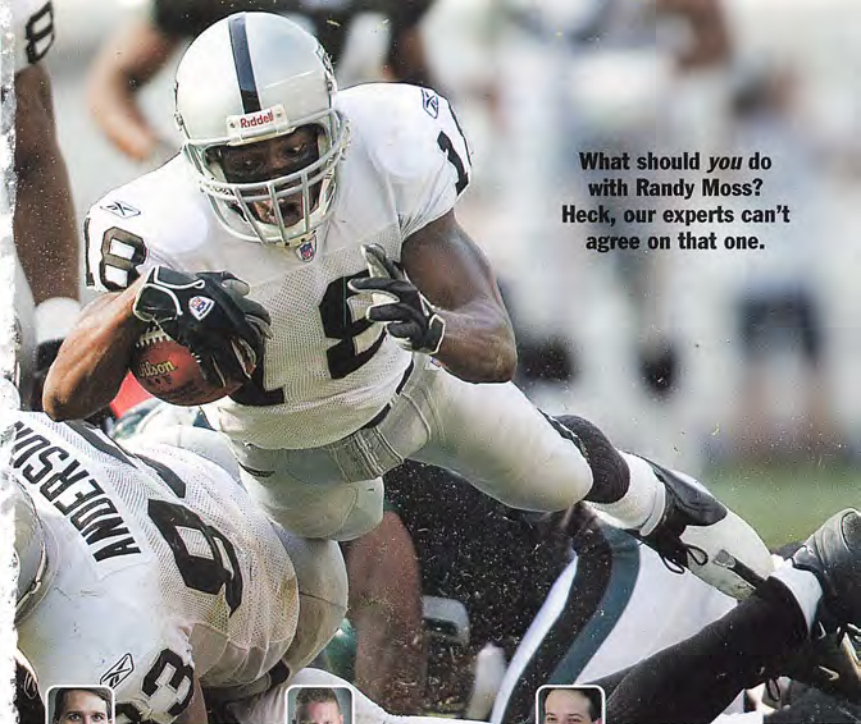
Donovan McNabb, QB

Trent Green, QB

Todd Heap, TE







**What should you do  
with Randy Moss?  
Heck, our experts can't  
agree on that one.**



**Roger Kuznia**

Mark Clayton, WR  
Byron Leftwich, QB  
Ahman Green, RB  
Michael Clayton, WR  
Eli Manning, QB  
Terry Glenn, WR



**Brendan Roberts**

Kevin Curtis, WR  
DeShaun Foster, RB  
Jamal Lewis, RB  
Edgerrin James, RB  
Randy Moss, WR  
Warrick Dunn, RB



**George Winkler**

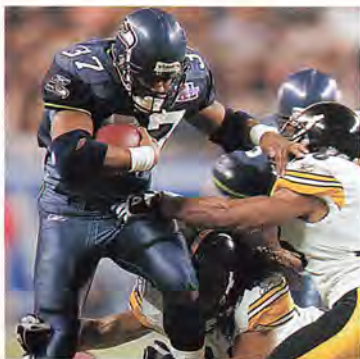
DeAngelo Williams, RB  
Ashley Lelie, WR  
Curtis Martin, RB  
Jamal Lewis, RB  
T.J. Houshmandzadeh, WR  
Jerry Porter, WR





# TOP 50 PLAYERS

1. Larry Johnson, RB, Chiefs
2. **Shaun Alexander, RB, Seahawks**
3. LaDainian Tomlinson, RB, Chargers
4. Tiki Barber, RB, Giants
5. Clinton Portis, RB, Redskins
6. Edgerrin James, RB, Cardinals
7. LaMont Jordan, RB, Raiders
8. Ronnie Brown, RB, Dolphins
9. Steven Jackson, RB, Rams
10. Cadillac Williams, RB, Bucs
11. Peyton Manning, QB, Colts
12. Domanick Davis, RB, Texans
13. Rudi Johnson, RB, Bengals
14. Willis McGahee, RB, Bills
15. Steve Smith, WR, Panthers
16. Chad Johnson, WR, Bengals
17. Torry Holt, WR, Rams
18. Terrell Owens, WR, Cowboys
19. Brian Westbrook, RB, Eagles
20. Marvin Harrison, WR, Colts
21. Randy Moss, WR, Raiders
22. Larry Fitzgerald, WR, Cardinals
23. Anquan Boldin, WR, Cardinals
24. Willie Parker, RB, Steelers
25. Antonio Gates, TE, Chargers
26. Julius Jones, RB, Cowboys
27. Chris Chambers, WR, Dolphins
28. Chester Taylor, RB, Vikings
29. Reuben Droughns, RB, Browns
30. Hines Ward, WR, Steelers
31. Reggie Wayne, WR, Colts
32. Jamal Lewis, RB, Ravens



ROBERT SEALE / SN

33. Kevin Jones, RB, Lions
34. Darrell Jackson, WR, Seahawks
35. Tom Brady, QB, Patriots
36. Warrick Dunn, RB, Falcons
37. Plaxico Burress, WR, Giants
38. Jeremy Shockey, TE, Giants
39. Santana Moss, WR, Redskins
40. Corey Dillon, RB, Patriots
41. Roy Williams, WR, Lions
42. Carson Palmer, QB, Bengals
43. Reggie Bush, RB, Saints
44. DeShaun Foster, RB, Panthers
45. Andre Johnson, WR, Texans
46. Donald Driver, WR, Packers
47. Tony Gonzalez, TE, Chiefs
48. Joseph Addai, RB, Colts
49. Tatum Bell, RB, Broncos
50. Donovan McNabb, QB, Eagles





Bush

# TOPROOKIES

**Joseph Addai, RB, Colts.** Edgerrin James is gone, and Addai's upside makes him a good fourth-round pick. But veterans Dominic Rhodes and James Munro figure to stay involved, especially near the goal line.

**Reggie Bush, RB, Saints.** Even if Deuce McAllister is healthy, the team can get Bush's thrilling talent on the field as a runner, receiver and return specialist.

**Vernon Davis, TE, 49ers.** Forget the tears he shed at the draft; his trademark in San Francisco will be shedding defenders with his 4.38 speed. Davis has great hands and becomes Alex Smith's go-to guy and the team's best fantasy receiver—someone to draft after the elite tight ends are gone.

**Santonio Holmes, WR, Steelers.** Pittsburgh got the young big-play threat it wanted to develop opposite Hines Ward. Expect the team to open up the passing game, meaning you can target Holmes as a No. 4 or 5 fantasy receiver.

**Laurence Maroney, RB, Patriots.** It's hard to see Corey Dillon, 31, holding up for a full season. That makes Maroney a great mid-round sleeper. He can be just as effective as Dillon between the tackles.

**DeAngelo Williams, RB, Panthers.** Williams enters a great situation in Carolina with Stephen Davis released and DeShaun Foster coming off another injury. Look for DeAngelo to succeed another Williams—Cadillac—as offensive rookie of the year.

Williams

Maroney

BOB LEVERONE / SN

STEPHAN SAVOIA / AP





# SLEEPERS

These players fly slightly under the radar but could provide the kind of value that helps win fantasy championships.

**David Givens, WR, Titans.** Givens was one of a host of productive receivers in New England, but he'll be the go-to guy in Tennessee.

**Frank Gore, RB, 49ers.** He has a chance to beat out Kevan Barlow for the starting job, and Gore is a solid fit for new coordinator Norv Turner's power running game.

**Philip Rivers, QB, Chargers.** He has the arm, athleticism and smarts to adequately replace Drew Brees. Rivers also is blessed with two of the game's top playmakers in LaDainian Tomlinson and Antonio Gates.

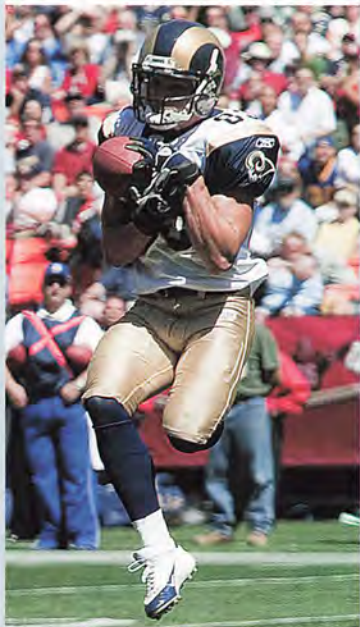
**L.J. Smith, TE, Eagles.** If Donovan McNabb rebounds, Smith could have a breakout year.

**Chester Taylor, RB, Vikings.** His move from Baltimore gives him a chance to be the guy. Taylor may be as valuable as a receiver because new coach Brad Childress favors short passes to the backs as an alternative to the running game.

**Kurt Warner, QB, Cardinals.** He has two great targets in Larry Fitzgerald and Anquan Boldin, plus Warner now has Edgerrin James to help keep defenses honest.

## Kevin Curtis, WR, Rams.

He is an excellent deep threat and has all the tools to pass Isaac Bruce on the depth chart. Curtis could be a solid No. 3 fantasy receiver.



ALBERT DICKSON / SN







### **Thomas Jones, RB, Bears.**

Jones is coming off a career year, but the Bears would love to get Cedric Benson on the field more.

quarterback rating in 2002.

**Jermaine Wiggins, TE, Vikings.** Wiggins has a good relationship with Brad Johnson and catches a lot of passes, but he rarely sees the ball near the goal line.

## **BUSTS**

Be leery of drafting these players too high because their fantasy production is in peril.

**Chris Brown, RB, Titans.** Brown has had trouble staying healthy and is expected to share the load with Travis Henry and LenDale White. Brown is a borderline No. 2 fantasy back.

**Brett Favre, QB, Packers.** Favre still has the arm and that go-for-broke mentality, but the Packers don't have much around him. He's not the player he once was.

**Joey Galloway, WR, Buccaneers.** Galloway's age (34) and the presence of a healthy Michael Clayton do not bode well for a repeat of last season.

**Keenan McCardell, WR, Chargers.** Between his age (36) and Philip Rivers taking over at quarterback, McCardell is due for a fall in 2006.

**Neil Rackers, K, Cardinals.** If Edgerrin James adds to Arizona's touchdown total, Rackers' field-goal opportunities will drop.

**Michael Vick, QB, Falcons.** Because of his electrifying runs and amazing arm strength, Vick gets more attention in drafts than he deserves. He has regressed since posting his career-high







BOB LEVERONE / SN

## **Chris Bahr's GOAL-LINE SPECIALISTS**

1. T.J. Duckett, Falcons
2. Duce Staley, Steelers
3. Brandon Jacobs, Giants
4. Greg Jones, Jaguars
5. LenDale White, Titans

## **Rob Hurtt's BACKUP QUARTERBACKS TO TRACK**

1. Josh McCown, Lions
2. Brian Griese, Bears
3. Matt Leinart, Cardinals
4. Patrick Ramsey, Jets
5. David Garrard, Jaguars

## **Vinnie Iyer's No. 2 RECEIVERS WHO CAN PERFORM LIKE No. 1s**

1. Larry Fitzgerald, Cardinals
2. Reggie Wayne, Colts
3. T.J. Houshmandzadeh, Bengals
4. Nate Burleson, Seahawks
5. Donte' Stallworth, Saints

## **Roger Kuznia's RUNNING BACK INJURY RISKS**

1. Fred Taylor, Jaguars
2. Kevin Jones, Lions
3. Deuce McAllister, Saints
4. Ahman Green, Packers
5. DeShaun Foster, Panthers

## **Brendan Roberts' BREAKOUT TIGHT ENDS**

1. Ben Troupe, Titans
2. Kellen Winslow, Browns
3. Vernon Davis, 49ers
4. Ben Watson, Patriots
5. Mercedes Lewis, Jaguars

## **George Winkler's TOP BACKUP RUNNING BACKS**

1. Reggie Bush, Saints
2. Cedric Benson, Bears
3. DeAngelo Williams, Panthers
4. Mike Anderson, Ravens
5. Marion Barber, Cowboys





# PLAYOFF MATCHUP HEAVEN AND HELL

A look at teams that appear to have favorable or unfavorable matchups during Weeks 14 through 16, the typical fantasy playoff weeks.

## HEAVEN



**Packers.** The Frozen Tundra might slow down this offense, but opposing defenses (49ers, Lions, Vikings) shouldn't.



**Raiders.** The word "heavenly" usually applies to any schedule that has the Rams (Week 15) and Chiefs (Week 16) in back-to-back home games.



**Vikings.** Two games in domes (at Detroit, vs. the N.Y. Jets), then one at Green Bay. Yahtzee!

*Other possibilities: Colts, Jets, Seahawks.*

## HELL



**Browns.** At Pittsburgh, at Baltimore, vs. Tampa Bay. Need we say more?



**Falcons.** Not only do they have Tampa Bay, Dallas and Carolina in Weeks 14 through 16, but the Redskins are daunting in Week 13.



**Saints.** Somehow they drew three tough NFC East defenses—at Dallas, vs. Washington and at New York—during these key weeks.

*Other possibilities: Steelers, Rams, Redskins.*

## OPEN WEEKS

**Week 3:** Cowboys, Chiefs, Raiders, Chargers

**Week 4:** Broncos, Giants, Steelers, Buccaneers

**Week 5:** Falcons, Bengals, Texans, Seahawks

**Week 6:** Browns, Packers, Colts, Jaguars, Vikings, Patriots

**Week 7:** Ravens, Bears, Saints, 49ers, Rams, Titans

**Week 8:** Bills, Lions, Dolphins, Redskins

**Week 9:** Cardinals, Panthers, Jets, Eagles





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